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HER HUSBAND'S

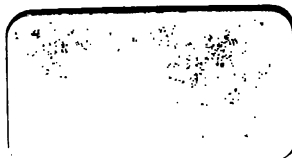


KEEPER.





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HER HUSBAND'S KEEPER.

A NOVEL.

BY

MRS. MACKENZIE-DANIEL,

AUTHOR OF "ESTHER DUDLEY'S WOOERS," "THE OLD MAID
OF THE FAMILY," ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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HER HUSBAND'S KEEPER.

CHAPTER I.

MRS. BELLEW A LITTLE TRYING.

THEY had a great deal to talk about, many things apart from actual love making to say to each other, even in that half stolen interview, with the waving branches of the tall trees outside nearly excluding the world beyond, and a triad of stone cherubim gazing down upon them with inflated cheeks and extended wings, as if promising the recently affianced pair guardianship and protection in the unseen years that were before them.

First, David thought it right, and even necessary, to give Margaret fuller details of

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his past wretched life than, either from himself or others, she had yet learned—to show her what the mother of his girls had really been, that she, who was to call them *her* girls henceforth, might the better understand how their strange coldness and reserve and pride had grown upon them. For David Fletcher was far too honest, besides having too profound a love for the woman he was taking to his heart and home, to wish for one moment to conceal from her that her position, as his wife, would be one open to many difficulties, vexations, and perplexities. Especially he spoke of his daughter Elizabeth, warning Margaret that she would, in all likelihood, begin by storming at the notion of her father choosing a second wife, and end, when she discovered the futility of her disapproval, by making that wife's pathway as rugged and disagreeable as she possibly could. As regarded Amy, David believed that Margaret might

in time win her affection and duty, though even this would be uphill work, with her sister's influence pulling continually the other way.

"I will do my best to win them both," Margaret said, in reply to it all, with earnest feeling, "but if I do not succeed it cannot be helped. My becoming your daughters' stepmother, I regard as simply an accident contingent on my becoming your wife. If I do not fail in making *you* happy, I shall have little to regret when my own life is ending."

Then she told him how what she had heard of his history, before they ever met, had interested her to an extent that she herself wondered at, and considered strange and almost romantic for one brought up as she had been with the most matter-of-fact surroundings, and, as her spinsterhood at thirty-one went far towards proving, without a grain of that susceptibility which might

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have accounted for her readiness to imbibe a strong impression.

“So you fell in love, not with me, it seems, but with the unhappy hero of a melancholy story that had pleased your imagination,” said David, not quite sure whether this frank confession of his Margaret ought to add to his happiness. “And when we did meet, my love, have you the courage to tell me truthfully how far you were repelled and disenchanted?”


Margaret’s widely opened eyes and laughing lips were just then a pretty sight to see—

“I was not repelled or disenchanted at all,” she answered instantly. “Why should I have been? You were exactly the David Fletcher I had been thinking and dreaming of so foolishly since I had come to Ditchley; and besides, I had seen you more than once at church.”

“Well, you are a rare woman!” exclaimed

poor David, with a great sigh of relief, and with all his ardent soul beaming from his eyes upon her, whose love he was at last almost convinced of; "and I feel that the dedication of my whole life will never repay a tithe of your goodness to me. It seems to me, Margaret," he added dreamily, as she only smiled softly at his enthusiasm, "that Heaven has suddenly come down to me, and that I, who have dwelt for so many years in a lonely desert, am walking now, with a pure and pitying angel beside me, in the fields of paradise. I shall want a little rough shaking from some quarter to remind me that I am still upon the hard common earth, and subject to earthly woes and vicissitudes."

"I don't apprehend that these shakings will be lacking when your daughters return," said Margaret, in a cheerful voice, but with a foreboding heart; "and then, you know, there is my mother to be thought of."



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She has very peculiar views on the subject of widows and widowers remarrying, and I believe will deem me quite crazy when she hears that I am contemplating the responsibility of managing your large establishment, and becoming the mother of your two grown-up daughters. It *is* an unheard-of piece of presumption, now I come to think seriously of it."

"I have not a doubt that you will manage us all beautifully," said David, revelling, as well he might, in the idea of a gentle spirit like that of his Margaret presiding over his household; "but as regards Mrs. Bellew, I am aware that she has no love for me, and that she had set her heart upon another son-in-law. But you are not a child, my dearest, and you will not allow any opposition she may offer to turn you against me now?"

"I will not," replied Margaret firmly, but with a little sadness too. "Nevertheless, we must open our eyes to the fact that my

mother's prejudices are obstinate things, and that she may choose to put a good many stumbling-blocks in my way, especially if she finds that your daughters are unwilling to receive me as your wife."

"We will do battle with and conquer them all," exclaimed David valiantly. "Having your dear love to sustain me, I could not be made afraid, though a hundred daughters on one side, and fifty Mrs. Bellews on the other, stood in our way. I shall tell Elizabeth frankly of my engagement, as soon as she comes home; and you will not delay speaking to your mother?"

"I will not delay it long," Margaret answered, with a sudden fluttering at her heart, which she would not have cared that David should discover; "but I must watch my opportunity, and act with some degree of caution. My mother has no child, no companion, except myself, and her grief will be harder for me to bear than her anger. When I


say her grief, you are not to understand that I am thinking of any personal objection she may have towards you, though I know that her feelings are strong on the subject of second marriages, especially where there is a grown-up family ; but I allude to her natural regret at losing an only daughter, a regret that will be all the keener from the certain fact that she will try to hide it. My poor mother ! she is a strange character, and after all these years, I know her only superficially ; but I am quite sure her heart is warmer than she chooses her fellow-creatures to believe, and I fancy sometimes that she is lonelier in her inmost being than she would ever acknowledge."

" We must try to brighten her life for her by-and-by," said David warmly. " She must not be allowed to miss you very seriously, my Margaret. I can well imagine what it must be to have had your companionship for long years, and then to lose it. Heaven,

in its goodness, keep that calamity from me," he added, solemnly, as a drear and sickening thought glanced into his naturally foreboding mind for a moment. "But you are young and strong, and untried in constitution. I shall be sure to go before you."

"Pray do not talk in that way," besought Margaret, who felt that it would take very little to shatter her own nerves hopelessly for this afternoon. "I never *could* see the good of speculating concerning a future which is mercifully veiled from our weak and timid eyes. Besides, we are lingering here in utter forgetfulness of the time. My mother and your niece must be somewhere in the grounds now. Had we not better go and look for them?"

David did not even pretend to like the suggestion, but he had no excuse for opposing it, and so they went out of the little temple together, and retracing their steps



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slowly, came upon the two ladies about the boundary of the lawn, Mrs. Bellew having preferred keeping to the open space, where there were a few gleams of occasional sunshine, to penetrating into the recesses of the shrubberies, which she told Rhoda, confidentially, looked to her damp and cold.

It is true neither David nor Margaret had found them so; but then they were passing through an experience which could never come again to the elder lady, and which gave them a fleeting advantage over her in the way of insensibility to atmospheric influences.

Mrs. Bellew apologized very politely to the master of the Hall for not caring to extend her rambles on this occasion. She observed, in her brisk short manner, that she was not accustomed to spend an entire morning in idleness and pleasure, both of which tired her far more than any amount of habitual work. And then she expressed

her warm admiration of all she had seen of the grounds, and hoped some day, though it could not be just yet, that she should have an opportunity of making more intimate acquaintance with them.

A mere formal, complimentary speech, as David Fletcher perfectly well knew, but he chuckled, in his inmost heart, thinking how much surer of fulfilment her vague promise was than she herself had the least idea of.

Soon after this, and when David had gathered a few of the choicest flowers he could find in his conservatory for Mrs. Bellew, (who accepted them graciously) that lady declared it was time to return to the house, as their fly would be waiting for them, and the evening was threatening to be dull and cold.

Rhoda, who was looking very excited and happy, kissed Margaret with peculiar significance and emphasis at parting. David did not dare venture upon more than a fervent

hand pressure in saying good-bye to his future wife ; but he evidently felt this enjoined reticence hard, and his last look said plainly—" Let us end all secrecy as speedily as possible."

Both uncle and niece made their adieux to Mrs. Bellew with marked cordiality, thanking her for her visit, and earnestly hoping that she would be prevailed on to repeat it very soon.

Margaret could not doubt that her mother would be gratified with her reception altogether, and quite anticipated that the good temper of the morning would last throughout the day. She was a little disappointed that Mrs. Bellew did not volunteer any remarks during all the first part of the drive to Abbotsmead. Her own self-consciousness made it difficult for her to originate a conversation. She had never till now had a secret of the least important kind from her mother, and it burdened her, though she

knew it was only for a short period, and that her motives, in choosing to delay her confession, were really wise and judicious, and not cowardly or weak.

They had passed the village, the church, and the rector's house, before a word was spoken by either of the ladies. Then, just as they entered upon the long, straight road leading direct to their home, Mrs. Bellew roused herself abruptly to say—

“ You have had a very agreeable visit, I presume? I am sure you looked, when you came upon us suddenly on the lawn, as if you had got rid of ten years of your life, and somebody had left you a handsome fortune to enjoy your recovered youth with.”

Margaret's face, which had settled into a soft tender expression in the silence of the last quarter of an hour, flushed deeply for a moment; but she only smiled as she replied—

“ I doubt whether the going back to girl-

hood, or the acquisition of a handsome fortune, would add materially to my enjoyment of life. Anyhow, I found it quite possible to enjoy the hospitality of our kind neighbour without either of these advantages. Did you not have a pleasant morning too?"

"Oh yes," (jerkily) "I had nothing whatever to complain of, except the loss of my own time, which was my fault and not David Fletcher's. I daresay if his eldest daughter were as amiable and affable as Miss Meredith, it might be an agreeable house to visit at. He is a good host, and there are ample means for both intellectual and material enjoyment; but report affirms Elizabeth Fletcher to be a vixen of a stronger type than even her mother before her. She will drive everybody from the Hall, and the poor weak father will become as bearish and unsocial as he was in his wife's time. It is a pity."

"It would indeed be a great pity," as-

sented Margaret, discovering that a reply was waited for ; “ but I should think something might be done to avert so serious a calamity. Perhaps Miss Fletcher, who they say is very handsome, may marry early herself.”

“ Not likely with her temper ! ” was the sharp reply ; and as Margaret could originate no other suggestion that would not have involved more or less of hypocrisy, if it had still had respect to her own secret, she was thankful that the abrupt stopping of their vehicle gave her an excuse for silence, and diverted her mother’s thoughts into a new channel for the moment.

But there was a long evening yet to be got through, and after tea, which was quickly disposed of,—Mrs. Bellew remarking that it was a superfluous meal to-day, seeing that they had dined an hour later than usual and partaken of a variety of dainty dishes,—the huge work basket was sent for, the lamp

lighted, and the lady of the house ready to take her usual seat at the table, and to make up, by redoubled industry, for what she would never cease to consider her wasted morning.

Margaret, whose fingers knew nothing of that ceaseless itching for a needle and thread which was almost a disease with her mother, and who loathed the idea of needlework and disjointed dialogue to-night, proposed reading aloud to her companion, reminding the latter that they had as yet scarcely glanced at the morning paper.

"Oh! I saw quite enough of it," said Mrs. Bellew, hastily; "there's nothing in it, and I'm not in the humour for listening to reading. I never am after being upset and excited by going out at unusual hours. Get some work of your own, Margaret, for goodness sake, and try to sit still for an hour or two. Your restlessness is evidently growing fast upon you."

So poor Margaret fetched some plain sewing, took her station at that dismal centre table, opposite to her mother, and resigned herself to a penance she had no means whatever of escaping.

It proved even a more trying one than she had anticipated.

Mrs. Bellow was a woman who lived essentially in the immediate present, without (except on rare occasions) giving any token that she looked back to the past or onward to the future. At her age this is, I believe, a very general experience, and Margaret, who was really in the habit of studying her mother's character a good deal, had always regarded it as a natural thing, and one to be rather rejoiced over than otherwise. Great, therefore, was her astonishment when to-night Mrs. Bellow, in the midst of her diligent and rapid sewing, took a fancy for talking glibly and incessantly of the future, of the coming years, when—according to

the pictures she drew, tame and quiet pictures enough, with few contrasts of light and shade—Margaret and herself were to be still together, *always* together, pursuing the even tenor of their way—eating, drinking, sleeping, working, and, in short, living the old life, which to the younger was no life at all, and to the elder (apparently) the sum and substance of a complete and satisfied existence.

Mrs. Bellew did not heed that Margaret gave her short vague answers, or preserved a sorrowful silence, while her companion talked. The talker had manifestly her own object to accomplish, and she went at it blindfold, and with a dogged perseverance that became very tiresome, while it was almost pathetic, in the end.

Because it suddenly dawned on Margaret that her poor mother was not intending just to vex and worry her, as she had been inclined to think when her first mystification

had cleared away, but that she was, in reality, making a final and desperate struggle to avert a condition of things she shrank from and rebelled against with all the force of her strong nature, and that not knowing how far the enemy had gained upon her, she was putting up every feeble barrier she could heap together to stop his further progress.

But for very cowardice, Margaret would have told her the whole truth to-night; but her heart failed her, and seemed threatening to cease its beating every time she had the words ready. At last the tension of her nerves grew too painful for further endurance, and pleading a distracting headache (which her white face and lips confirmed) she crept away to bed, feeling less like a happy maiden just betrothed to the husband of her choice, than a condemned criminal, who expects to hear that his execution is fixed for the next morning.

CHAPTER II.

DAVID'S LETTER.

THE next day and the next after it, nothing happened of the least interest or importance to the very quiet dwellers at Abbotsmead. Mrs. Bellew continued tolerably good-tempered and spasmodically cheerful, sometimes arousing Margaret from a profound and anxious reverie of her own, by a smart or facetious little observation which, if it did not come from the heart, was at least a very fair imitation of a light heart's careless utterance. Whenever the two ladies sat at work together, the mother would still contrive to make her desultory talk reach onwards to the future, always closely associating Mar-

garet with herself in these prophetic visions, and assuming that nothing could by any possibility now divide their lives till death came with his inexorable summons, to part them finally in the present world.

Margaret, whose spirits had been declining lower and lower every hour since that eventful visit at the Hall, often wondered how she was to get courage to tell her mother of her engagement, going over, in imagination, on each of these occasions, the terrible scene that would inevitably follow, picturing with cruel, self-tormenting minuteness, the looks, the tones, the gestures, of the excitable woman, who had set her face as a flint against the very thought of David Fletcher for a son-in-law, and who, as her daughter too well knew, would under the impulse of a thwarted will stop at nothing, in the way of bitter and stabbing words, by which she might hope to express her stern and relentless displeasure.

On the third morning, and just when poor Margaret was beginning to feel keenly the pressure of the iron that now daily entered her weak and trembling soul, in the shape of every kind or gentle word her mother ever spoke to her, Rhoda Meredith arrived post haste to make a call upon the ladies of Abbotsmead. Ostensibly she came to bring a tiny basket of forced strawberries to Mrs Bellew, from her uncle—they were the first that had been gathered, and Mr. Fletcher hoped, with his kindest regards, that his esteemed friend and neighbour would pardon the insignificance of the offering, and do him the favour to accept it. But, in reality, Rhoda's mission was to convey a letter from David to Margaret, and she gave it with such a loving little smile, followed by a kiss of such extreme heartiness, that the receiver of the document did not very much mind the fact that this simple, affectionate child was perforce a witness of her sudden and vexatious blushes.

"I suppose I need not read it at once?" Margaret said, interrogatively, as Rhoda was discreetly turning to the window, after the embrace; "there is no answer required, is there?"

"None for me to take, I imagine," answered the other, abruptly, facing her friend again; "but Uncle David seems in a very restless, anxious state, and—and—" (half timidly, as though not quite sure of her ground, but willing to risk something to bring possible comfort to him she was speaking of) "if you *can* write anything that will make him easier and happier, I am sure you are too kind and good not to be willing to do so."

"Come and have a turn with me in the garden if you are not in a hurry," said Margaret, without any definite notice of Rhoda's earnest appeal. "It would be useless asking my mother to see you at this time of the day, but there is no reason why you and I should not enjoy a few minutes together."

They did not talk much when they got out into the sunny garden—only Margaret elicited the fact (and possibly this was all she wanted) that there had been no more letters from Paris, but that David and Rhoda both thought it likely that the expected guests might arrive any day now, without giving further notice of their advent.

“It would be quite like Elizabeth, I am afraid, to take her father by surprise,” added the niece gravely. “She knows he is sensitive and shy with strangers, and therefore she ought not to bring my mother, who is nearly a stranger, upon him unawares. I hope sincerely she will *not*; but Uncle David is evidently dreading this, and indeed their coming at all just now is in itself a source of very wearing excitement to him.”


“Is Mr. Fletcher not well then?” Margaret ventured to ask in a hesitating voice, and with rapidly varying colour.

“He is not well by any means,” Rhoda

answered promptly. "I don't believe he sleeps an hour during the night, and his days are spent in aimless wanderings about the house and grounds that just exhaust his body without bringing any repose to his mind. I wish he would take to some useful and definite occupation. People can't be happy who don't work. Do you think they can, now?"

"I suppose not," said Margaret, with a somewhat mournful smile; "but I fancy your uncle will have to be made happy, in a greater or less degree, before he will see the necessity for work in his own case. The workers of this world—the successful workers, at any rate—are those who, like yourself, my dear little Rhoda, have free, glad hearts, and no very weighty pressure of outward circumstances."

"Then I can only say I devoutly hope poor uncle will soon be made happy!" exclaimed Rhoda with energy. "And now



I must go back and coax him out for a drive ; and you, dear Miss Bellew, will be kind enough, when I am fairly off, to read and answer his letter."

David's first letter to his future wife was not a long one, but it was very much to the purpose. This is what he had written—

"I have been trying very hard to be patient, my love, and to rest in the blissful assurance that you do care a little for me—you, the one woman in the world to gain whose friendship even I would willingly and joyfully have knelt at your feet till the pleading eyes lost their power of vision, and the pleading lips became dumb from their ceaseless asking. But, my Margaret, this suspense is killing me. I fear everything from the very magnitude of what I have at stake. I fear your love and tenderness for your mother, the habit of deference to her will which has been naturally growing

upon you all the years of your life. Will you have courage, I ask of my fainting heart, stedfastly to resist and oppose her, when the battle between you begins? Will *my* claim, as a stranger and an interloper, weigh against the claim of a mother to whom, as you pathetically told me the other day, you were and had ever been an only child? Oh, my Margaret, forgive me if I seem to doubt you, to question the reality of the dear love you have acknowledged, and which raised me that hour to the very pinnacle of blessedness—which is still the only thing that sustains me in the midst of the terrors and forebodings that haunt and distract me, both asleep and awake. How can I plead my own cause? How can I convince you that to whatever extent your mother may need you, *I* need you, my love, my very dearest, a million times more! Something of my past wretched loveless existence you know. Multiply that wretchedness by

figures as numerous as the sands of the sea, and it would still fall short of the misery that must be my life-long portion, if you were to fail me now. Margaret, I implore you, end my torture—speak to your mother—be pitiful, be brave, be true to your woman's tender nature! I give you two days more. I cannot give you longer. My very soul is withering in an unwholesome atmosphere. Remember, and this shall be my last and parting word,—I love you with a love mighty enough to raise my claim to you above all other claims, and I want you, Margaret; I want you in my home, and in my daily, hourly sight, as no other living being in the wide universe can or must ever want you. Let this truth be graven on your mind, and standing out in flaming letters before your eyes, when you tell your mother that the time has come for you to leave her.

“DAVID.”

Long before Margaret had finished the careful study of this touching epistle from her enthusiastic lover, it was all blurred and blotted with her silly tears. She called them silly herself, being quite unused to sudden and promiscuous weeping—but the poor young woman, you see, really had some legitimate cause for crying now. There was David Fletcher, the unhappy man whose sorrows she had been so long yearning to soothe, whose wife she had promised solemnly to become, drawing her, with all the force of a magnetic power, on the one hand, and there was her mother, whom in her heart she truly loved, and whom her desertion would condemn to utter loneliness, holding her, with an iron tenacity, firmly back on the other. And she was only to have two days wherein to gather together her forces—how feeble they all seemed in prospective!—for the coming and final struggle. Surely David had not sufficiently estimated her

difficulties, had lost sight, in his own apprehensions, of everything besides these, or he would not have urged such cruel haste, appealing to the tenderness he knew she felt towards him, to ensure a compliance with his passionate wish.

But Margaret's crying was over at last, for an inspiration had suddenly come to her, in the midst of these weak and impotent tears. Why should she go through another two days of anticipatory torture? What was there to hinder her from entering her mother's presence at once, that very minute, and saying to her—

“Mother, the time has come to me which comes to so many women, and in obedience to a call, too strong to be disobeyed, I must leave you, to fulfil my inevitable destiny, and to discharge the duties of a wife, instead of those of a daughter. I have chosen my husband, and, forsaking all others, I mean henceforth to cleave to him alone.”

Frank true words these would be, and highly suitable for the occasion ; and yet, as Margaret repeated them to herself, how strange, how passing strange, they seemed to her ! For David Fletcher was very far from the embodiment of her girlhood's hero. In her most romantic visions she had never pictured the man she should marry as one needing comforting for past sorrows, or such help as any wise and gentle woman might give him out of present morbid and unduly sensitive tendencies. Her hero had been ever strong in mind and frame, bright and firm in spirit, a little stern and unbending even in disposition, and certainly, and above all, without a single lachrymose propensity. In age alone, for Margaret had never had a fancy for young men, David came up to the standard of her ideal husband—and yet she loved this poor saddened David with all her heart and soul, and, but for her mother, would have been abundantly happy in the prospect of adding to his happiness.

One more agitated reading of his pathetic letter, one more adjuration to the beating heart to calm its cowardly throbbings, one more assurance to herself that she is right in what she is going to do, that David Fletcher's need of her is as great and justifying as he affirms it to be, and then Margaret, without another backward look or thought, steps across the threshold of her own room, and goes down stairs to confront her mother.

CHAPTER III.

THE CONFESSION MADE.

ONCE in her mother's presence, Margaret very soon got over all she had to say. She did not use the exact formula she had thought of in her own room, for under strong excitement the very plainest and simplest words usually suggest themselves, but she made it clearly understood that she was announcing a fact that had become unalterable, and which the one suspicion that her mother would look at it disapprovingly alone rendered otherwise than a glad and joyous fact to herself.

Mrs. Bellew had not put down her work when her daughter first entered the room ;

she did not put it down all the time Margaret was speaking ; but when the earnest, and somewhat faltering voice died away, and there was utter stillness in the large room, she dropped her needle, folded her hands, with an evidently rigid tightness, in her lap, and bent her eyes, which had an abnormal expression in them, full upon her pale and still standing daughter.

“ What do you expect of me ?” she asked, in a voice that betrayed, even through a cold and cynical ring in it that was meant to wound, an emotion which wounded infinitely more. “ You tell me you are engaged to be married, that you intend to fulfil your engagement, that you are sorry I have no fancy for the husband of your choice, implying that such a trivial accident cannot be helped, and here you wind up your obliging though somewhat abrupt communication. I say again, therefore, what do you expect of me ?”

Now this reception of her news was so entirely different from anything that Margaret had ever imagined it would be, that she was taken at a disadvantage, and for a minute or two absolutely unable to make a reply at all. Her face changed from pale to red, tears sprang to the eyes so recently dried, and the lump that had been in her throat the whole time seemed increasing in bulk and sandiness, and threatening to choke her.

"Is it congratulations you are waiting for?" Mrs. Bellew said, pitilessly (it is to be inferred that all her pity was expended on herself), "because if so, I regret that I cannot conscientiously offer them. You will have, it is true, a fine house, and plenty of servants, and a carriage, and be quite a grand lady in the county; but these advantages would be outweighed in my estimation (I mean were I in your place) by a few other little conditions annexed to them, and by the

certain fact that everybody will very naturally say that you have sold yourself, or perhaps that I have sold you for money and position. If it was a husband you wanted, or a home of your own, there was one at your command which any woman, with treble your attractions, would have been proud to secure. It does seem rather incomprehensible to my obtuse mind that you must go out of your way to pick up a hunchbacked widower, with two rebellious daughters, and a soured, moody temper of his own, if I am not greatly mistaken—but you have done it, and as you have made your bed so you must lie on it. I don't see that I can do anything to help you till you tell me the day is fixed, and require my poor services in cutting out and otherwise assisting you with your *trousseau*."

Margaret could speak now, though the lump was still in her poor throat, and her heart feeling like a cold rolling stone just below it.

"Mother," she said, slowly and sadly, "I have counted the cost of my undertaking, and I am not afraid. I shall try to do my duty, and certainly I shall not be intimidated, or even greatly affected, by any possible remarks or assumptions of the outside world. I must repeat, though you appear to scorn and mistrust my words, that your dislike to my future husband, and the thought of your loneliness when I am gone, are the only drawbacks to my entire contentment; but, as regards this last, would it not have been the same had I married the man you would have chosen for me? Can we not still be together as much and as often, my home being at the Hall, as if it had been at the Rectory? Mr. Fletcher wishes and expects that you will be constantly with us."

"Then, the man is a bigger fool than I took him for," came out sharply and with reckless bluntness; "and, though I thank

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him for the wish, I am not grateful for the expectation. Am I a woman to haunt the house of a married daughter, to sit at a son-in-law's table, to share the purple and fine linen of my nearest and dearest, while I have only homespun for my own fire side? You, at any rate, know me better than this, Margaret, and I beg you will impart your knowledge to Mr. David Fletcher of the Hall."

When Mrs. Bellew got really excited in talking, her voice betrayed so much more anger and irony than any softer emotion, that Margaret was nerved, for the time, to meet her with some degree of spirit, though she never quite lost sight of the depressing thought that her mother was now, and must be increasingly hereafter, a sufferer by *her* gain, and anticipated happiness.

"I wish," she said, with touching entreaty in her looks and tones, "that you would be content to discuss my engagement

without bitterness or wrath. Why should there be anything of this kind between a mother and daughter who really love each other, however little given to outward demonstration? There is surely nothing startling or unnatural in a woman of my age deciding on marrying, or in her choosing a husband for herself. Neither is it more remarkable, I imagine, that you should not see Mr. Fletcher with my eyes than that I should have failed to see Mr. Spenser with yours. I am sincerely sorry you do not like your future son-in-law, but I have no right to feel specially aggrieved at it. All this may change by-and-by. I confidently believe that it will. It would be an inexpressible grief to me if you should obstinately persist in absenting yourself from any house of which I was the mistress. Nor can I dimly understand the grounds on which you would do it as regards the Hall, if the same objection would not have applied to the Rectory."

“Why, a bat would not be too blind to see the difference,” responded the elder lady politely, though she had resumed her work again now, and seemed to be making an effort to speak calmly. Not that I should have troubled you very often even at the Rectory, for you know my own home is everything to me; and I *hate* going out anywhere—but, in the first place, Mr. Spenser is a gentleman I cordially like and respect; in the second place, my daughter’s social position would not have been above my own (do you think *this* is an agreeable reflection for a proud woman, Miss Margaret?); in the third place, the Rectory is within a walk of Abbotsmead, which to me, who don’t choose to be under obligations to my neighbours, or to fool away my own money, is a most important consideration. And, in the last place, there are no grown up imperious misses at the Rectory, whereas those at the Hall, if they are ever drilled into tolerating a step-

mother, which I doubt, would be quite certain to set their dainty feet upon that step-mother's mother, if she was ever idiot enough to put herself in their way. I think now I have made my views pretty clear to you, and we shall not need to go over this part of the ground again. Indeed, I should greatly prefer dropping the subject until there is something actually to be done in the matter. If Mr. Fletcher considers it incumbent on him to have a regulation interview with me, as your mother, let him appoint an afternoon, and I will be prepared to see him. And when you wish to begin upon your wedding-clothes, give me timely warning, and I will have my needle and thread at your service. Now ring the bell, if you please, Margaret, for all this talk has made me forget how time was going ; and I dare say Priscilla is waiting for me to let her have the potatoes for dinner."

Margaret was sufficiently weary and dispi-

rited to accede readily to her mother's expressed wish of dropping the subject of her engagement for the present. She was thankful to have got over the first brunt of the revelation, but she did not for a moment delude herself with the flattering notion that she had heard the last of Mrs. Bellew's insulting comments on poor David, of her dismal prophecies as regarded her daughter's own future life, or of her general disgust with the whole affair. On the contrary, she was quite sure that from now until the moment when she should cross the threshold of her mother's house to enter that of a husband, there would be no particle of time (apart from the very little time she could spend alone) in which Mrs. Bellew would not manage, either by look or voice, or subtle implication of some kind, if not by spoken words, to make her feel that a gulf had opened between them, and that it was never likely to close again. She would probably

not say much about her own anticipated loneliness—the stern woman's pride would rebel against this—but all the same Margaret knew it *was* one of the bitterest ingredients in the cup her hand had mixed for her mother ; and, as far as she was concerned, it was the only reflection that gave her abiding pain.

Before the evening of that day she had written briefly but affectionately to David, telling him her first ordeal was over, and advising his naming an early afternoon for calling on Mrs. Bellew.

This hint, it will be scarcely necessary to say, was very promptly acted on. David Fletcher seemed to be in feverish haste to get things as far advanced as possible by the time his daughters arrived ; and as his interview with Mrs. Bellew went off quietly, their talk being chiefly of what he meant to do for Margaret in the way of settlements, the spirits of this impressionable man were

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almost infectiously light and buoyant during the quarter of an hour's stroll in the garden at Abbotsmead which his lady-love ventured to indulge him with, when he came out from his dull business conversation in the drawing-room.

"There is only my Elizabeth to be encountered now," he said, in quite a cheery tone, as Margaret, infinitely less elated, though glad to be with him for even these few stolen minutes, paced in gentle gravity beside her lover; "and since we have managed so well—I mean so much better than *you* expected, my dearest, with Mrs. Bellew, we may surely hope—I may surely hope (correcting himself)—to manage comfortably with my own daughter. I am undecided yet whether I shall bring her to call here before telling her about you, or after."

"Don't look to me for counsel," replied Margaret, with a smiling shake of her head. "It will be much if I can help you in the

guidance of these young ladies by-and-by, when I come to know them. I would not venture to make the most trivial suggestion concerning your dealings with them now. You really must use you own unaided judgment."

David sighed in something of his old fashion, though, rallying quickly, he essayed a little laugh, as he said, "I shall do my best then, and allow circumstances to direct me. In any case, as Mrs. Meredith only proposes staying about a week at the Hall, we must get some people to dinner immediately after their arrival; and as you and your mother *must* come, we ought to have all explanations over by then. How sweet the flowers at Abbotsmead smell, my Margaret! I don't believe they are half so sweet anywhere else."

"Which means," laughed Margaret, "that I am to pick you one for your button-hole, I suppose. It must be a very humble one

if I do, for my mother considers the garden wholly her's, and objects strongly to my having any share in it but that of labourer."

"Then it is high time," answered David, without, however, believing this assertion literally, "that you took possession of a garden and house of your own. When will you come to me, Margaret?"

"Oh, we must talk of times and seasons later," said Margaret, with a swift blush, and a very strong feeling that she did not want to be hurried into matrimony. "There is Miss Elizabeth to be encountered and vanquished first."

"Miss Elizabeth, indeed!" he repeated, amused at the prim tone his companion had suddenly adopted. And then they both laughed, and Margaret picked a small spray of laurustinus, which David instantly transferred to his button-hole; and after this she walked him peremptorily to the gate, where his carriage was standing, and with many

affectionate messages to Rhoda, and a lingering handshaking, which was quite his fault, with himself, sent him away rejoicing, and returned slowly indoors, to be goaded or snubbed for the rest of the day by her mother.

But Mrs. Bellew was in rather an airy, jaunty mood, the only clue to which Margaret discovered in the first words that lady addressed to her on her entering the room after dismissing David.

“ Well, if those young women don’t tear your eyes out, or put arsenic in your food, when they learn the extent of their father’s liberality to his second wife, I shall be *very* much astonished, and very much edified by their forbearance. Upon my word, Miss Margaret, you must have been born with a silver spoon in your mouth.”

And, for the small remnant of that day, Mrs. Bellew’s appreciation of money, though

not the strongest passion of her nature, proved strong enough to inspire in her a temporary respect for the daughter who was to be so lavishly and splendidly provided for.

CHAPTER IV.

DOMESTIC WARFARE.

A QUARREL with Priscilla—the first really serious dispute that had ever occurred between the mistress and her faithful, though stolid handmaiden—diverted Mrs. Bellew's mind from all other subjects during the next few days, and released Margaret from gibes and taunts, and persecutions of every description. It was not unnatural that it should do so, seeing that in a short time—*how* short none of them could precisely tell as yet—the daughter of the house would be away altogether, a member of another family circle, and with her place at Abbotsmead

knowing her no more for ever, whereas in all probability Mrs. Bellew and Priscilla would remain in close association, and have to endure each other's moods and tempers, for many long years to come.

Was it therefore to be wondered at, that, for the moment at any rate, while the disputants were still at open warfare, Priscilla should be a more important personage in Mrs. Bellew's eyes than her meek and usually sweet-tempered daughter!

It must be admitted, however, that Margaret's gain was, after all, only a qualified one. She was spared personal snubbing, it is true, and David's name had become a forgotten sound in her mother's lips, but on the other hand her poor shoulders had to bear, daily, nearly the whole weight of Priscilla's delinquencies, as it was not in Mrs. Bellew's nature to have a grievance of this especial kind and not talk incessantly about it. If she had talked of it to Priscilla herself, that

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independent female might have broken out into open revolt and left her without an hour's warning ; so the mistress was content to glare at the offending maid when they were obliged to meet in the kitchen, and to vent all the residue of her indignation and anger in a continual running fire of abuse in the parlour, with Margaret alone for audience. It was very tiresome and very wearying, and made the long days seem endless in their duration, for summer was coming on apace now, and Margaret, listening through the open windows to the singing birds, and the buzzing insects, smelling the myriad sweets with which the soft air was laden, yearned for liberty to run out whenever she felt inclined to the sunny garden, to talk with nature, to glean amongst the flowers she had herself planted, to fill the rooms she sat in with the most fragrant of the fast wasting blossoms, and, in short, to enjoy, like any other creature breathing

thoughtful breath, the good things scattered so lavishly around her, but to which, in reality, she was as much shut up, through her mother's peculiarities, as though they had no existence, or as though she had, through some heinous sin, forfeited her right to this sweet season's dower of universal blessing.

Perhaps she expected, during these monotonous days, to have heard from David again, or to have seen Rhoda, either of which events would have been a most welcome and agreeable break upon the domestic duet, or rather upon the solo, under the title of "Priscilla Criminis," which Mrs. Bellew played, and to which her daughter most unwillingly listened. But David did not write, and Rhoda did not come for four whole days succeeding the interview of the former with his future mamma-in-law. Margaret often amused herself by trying to picture what was going on at the Hall, by

wondering whether David was really happier since she had spoken to her mother, by speculating as to how he would announce his engagement to his daughters, by imagining (but this was always rather a nervous affair) her own first reception by Miss Elizabeth. She had declined giving David any advice about the very delicate matter concerning which he had been in doubt, but all the same she thought he *ought* to bring Miss Fletcher to call upon her before there was any question of her dining as an ordinary guest at the Hall. It was clearly in *her* home, not in his, that the introduction should take place, and Margaret confidently believed that, on due reflection, her future husband would see the propriety of such an arrangement, and act upon it.

She was therefore both a little surprised and a little disappointed when, on the fifth morning, one of the Hall servants brought her down a long letter from Mr. Fletcher,

very full of devotion and all that sort of thing, but giving, as a reason for his not having written before, that the party from the Continent had arrived unexpectedly at last, and that he had not been able, as yet, to find a single half-hour, either for speaking privately to his daughters at home or for suggesting bringing them to Abbotsmead. Mrs. Meredith was such a very exacting and overpowering woman, he added, that she claimed the whole of his time, and while in reality boring him to death, appeared satisfied that she was fascinating and charming him to a degree that, but for their relationship, might be dangerous. Elizabeth, he said, had grown quite into a woman, and he must acknowledge a very striking one ; but her manner was colder and haughtier than ever ; and she had been, since her arrival, in a decidedly sullen, ungracious temper, barely amiable even to her aunt, which astonished and puzzled the father not a little. Amy

was less altered and improved externally than her sister, but David fancied she was in some slight degree throwing off Elizabeth's yoke, and learning to think and judge for herself. He hoped Rhoda would be able to attract and influence his youngest daughter. They had been for several walks together already, while Elizabeth either remained alone in her own room or drove herself in solitary state (leaving him to entertain Mrs. Meredith) in the pony carriage—very often, he believed, to the cemetery. But after all this came the actual pith of David's confidential letter.

The dinner party must take place at the end of that week. Mrs. Meredith could not stay beyond the beginning of the next, and she had given several hints that she should enjoy meeting the country originals. *Did* Margaret think that Mrs. Bellew would consent (under the circumstances) to waive a formal call from his daughters, and come,

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as *his* friend, to the unceremonious gathering? Of Margaret's own docility he never seemed to entertain a moment's question.

"There would be only," he said, "the two curates—Mr. Spenser still being absent—a Colonel and Mrs. Bellairs, who lived a few miles out of Ditchley, and were very quiet old-fashioned people, the doctor and the lawyer, both of whom Mrs. Bellew knew, and their own family circle. Nothing in the least formidable, you see, my love," he added coaxingly, "so that even should your mother decline, which is a contingency I would rather not think of yet, I shall trust implicitly to *you*, as, in the event of any difficulty as to etiquette, Rhoda could come down in the carriage and fetch you. Then, after dinner, when you will have had an opportunity of making a favourable impression upon everybody—my Margaret cannot help doing this—we will get you and Elizabeth into the boudoir, away from all the company,

and the important news shall be disclosed. I promise you faithfully there shall be *no further delay.*"

Margaret believed him, but she could not help thinking that he had shown some cowardice in the matter hitherto, and she was sorry, especially in reference to Mrs. Bellew's opinion, that David had not contrived to bring his daughters to Abbotsmead before the dinner party. She felt that she should be placing herself in a false position by going as a common acquaintance to the Hall, and that, in the event of anything like a scene, when Elizabeth was told the real state of the case, David could do very little to help her, while he would probably suffer from the situation even more than she would.

It was no matter of surprise, scarcely one of disappointment, to Margaret, that her mother most firmly and indignantly declined going to the dinner. Even had the young

ladies called, she said she should most likely have made an excuse on her own account. As it was, she would see them all at Jericho first, and she thought Margaret entirely compromised her dignity and self-respect by not insisting upon a preliminary introduction, as the condition of her joining the party.

“However,” she added, with quite a triumphant sparkle in her eye (the Priscilla warfare was dying out by this time), “you have only yourself and your future master to please now, and I can but hope that the result of your present concession to his wishes may bring satisfaction and pleasure to both of you. I have no doubt Miss Elizabeth will be very amiable !”

Margaret wrote briefly to David, telling him her mother refused absolutely to come to the dinner and advising him not to send a formal invitation. For herself, she did not hesitate to say she should infinitely have

preferred being introduced to his daughters in her own home ; but she was prepared, nevertheless, to do what he wished, only stipulating that Rhoda should come down, as he proposed, to fetch her.

On this occasion, Margaret did not disdain to dress herself with unusual care and taste. There would be feminine eyes to examine and criticize her now—three pairs of eyes fresh from Paris with all its elegancies, and none of these eyes, she feared, in the least disposed to be indulgent as regarded any shortcomings of country neighbours, much less any shortcomings of hers—the stranger woman who was to be presented to them as the future mistress of the Hall, the supplanter of the dead lady lying under the cypresses, whom the sister and the daughters were still supposed to be mourning.

Even Mrs. Bellew, realizing in her secret heart the unusual interest and importance of

the situation, had enough of feminine instinct to be anxious concerning her daughter's appearance; and, quite at the last, when poor Margaret was worn out in doing everything for herself, and in what she hysterically called her superhuman and insane efforts to look nicer than nature ever meant her to look, the mother came in, and volunteered her assistance, bringing some old fashioned, but very handsome, pearl ornaments, which had not seen the light of day since her own early widowhood.

These, with a few scarlet flowers, freshly gathered, completed Margaret's simple adornments, and gave to her delicate pearl gray silk the finish it had required. Mrs. Bellew said, with some graciousness, that she would do very well, and added, with some *ungraciousness*, that if people were disposed to criticize they had better look at David. *He* had no right to expect to get a wife half as comely as Miss Bellew, and whatever opinion

his family might hold, the world without would wonder at Margaret's choice, and not at his.

When Rhoda arrived, she went into raptures over Margaret's toilette and appearance, declared she *must* make an agreeable impression on her mother and cousins, and, assuring Mrs. Bellew that her daughter should be taken every care of, and sent home under a suitable escort, bore her off in triumph, not a little proud, as she told them both, of having such a responsible and novel charge.

But as soon as she and Margaret were alone together in the carriage, Rhoda acknowledged that things were not going on at all pleasantly up at the Hall. Elizabeth seemed to grow colder and more reserved every day, absenting herself continually from the family circle, and rarely joining in any conversation when she was obliged to be amongst them. The father was used to this, or had been, in former times; but knowing

Elizabeth's devotedness to her aunt, he could not account for the indifference which she showed to that lady's society now, while Mrs. Meredith herself only shrugged her shoulders, and talked of girl's caprices, advising that her eldest niece should be left to take her own way.

As for Amy, Rhoda said she did not appear very happy, but she was evidently glad to be at home, and often talked to her cousin of her wish to become of use in the parish—not to take a lead as her mother had done—but to work under some one else,—the rector if he would let her,—and to have enough occupation to fill up the most of her time.

Poor Margaret, who was thinking of her own approaching ordeal, listened, it must be confessed, with a very slender interest to all that Rhoda had been telling her. She would have been glad to hear anything about David, but she could not give her attention to abstract items of information concerning his

daughters just now, nor care greatly whether they were grave or gay, except as either of these moods might influence them presently in their reception of her poor trembling, frightened little self.

Taking advantage of a pause in Rhoda's talk, she inquired whether any remarks had been made on Miss Meredith having out the carriage to fetch her from Abbotsmead—it would naturally excite some surprise.

"Yes it did, a little," Rhoda said frankly (her conscience would never let her hide, even if she palliated, an unwelcome truth) "My cousin Elizabeth wanted to know if such things had become the fashion at Ditchley, and uncle looked annoyed, and volunteered an explanation about your being a friend of mine, and your mamma not able to accompany you. I am afraid he gave the impression, unthinkingly of course, that you were a *very* young lady, and that I was really sent as a protectress for you."

Margaret coloured and bit her lips.

"It is a pity," she remarked, "that Mr. Fletcher should have done this. They will think it so ridiculous when they see me. Do you know, Rhoda," she added half appealingly and half desperately, "I have a great mind to give it up, and ask you to take me back home even now."

"Impossible, dear Miss Bellew," exclaimed Rhoda, frightened in her turn. "Uncle David would never forgive me if I allowed such a rash act on your part. He is going to lead you down to dinner, as Mrs. Bellairs, our elderly lady, cannot come. The colonel will take mamma, the doctor Elizabeth, the lawyer the doctor's wife, and then there will be the two curates for Amy and me. It is all quite settled, I assure you, and any change now, especially the change you were contemplating, would put out poor uncle dreadfully. Don't speak of it again, please. We shall be there in ten

minutes, and indeed, *indeed*” (with amusing emphasis), “you are looking so very pretty and nice.”

“Then, I think,” said Margaret, with rather a sickly smile (it is doubtful whether Rhoda’s compliment had reached beyond her outward ears), “that for those ten minutes, dear, I should prefer not talking. You will not mind my seeming rudeness, I am sure.”

And as Rhoda did not mind, her companion leant back in her own corner, closed her eyes tightly, and endeavoured, in the dancing kaleidoscope objects which this process brought before them, to shut out that obtrusive vision of Miss Elizabeth receiving her in the boudoir, which still, for all her pains, would keep coming into the foreground.

CHAPTER V.

MARGARET'S RECEPTION.

"HERE we are, then," exclaimed Rhoda, cheerily (she had been specially exhorted to keep up Margaret's spirits if they appeared to flag). "Here we are, and a very good thing too; for it is just five minutes over the hour at which dinner was ordered, and though uncle won't mind a bit, Elizabeth may possibly make a grievance of it if she is cross. However, we have only our shawls to take off, and then we are ready. I wish, dear Miss Bellew, you were not quite so pale. I am afraid Uncle David will say I have taken indifferent care of you."

Margaret was red enough when, in a few minutes later, the drawing room door was thrown ostentatiously open, and "Miss Bellew" announced in a loud and far-reaching voice, causing the buzz of a dozen tongues to be suddenly hushed, and turning upon her the glances, more or less inquisitive, of all the eyes belonging to the aforesaid tongues.

Lifting her own eyes, with a desperate attempt at self possession, they fell first upon a tall, handsome woman, stylishly dressed, standing near the door, in conversation with an elderly gentleman of military aspect, who moved politely aside as the new comers entered. The lady, whom Rhoda instantly addressed as "mamma," responded to her daughter's appeal by turning with a gracious, though surprised, face to Margaret, and allowing herself to be introduced, after which she looked across to the other

end of the large room, and called, in a decidedly amused voice,

“Elizabeth, my love, you are wanted here.”

But before Miss Fletcher, who was seated by the doctor in a half-hidden window recess, thought fit to obey this summons, David had disengaged himself from Mrs. Emerson, the doctor's wife, and an inveterate talker, and was hurrying as rapidly as his lameness would permit to welcome the guest in whom alone he was interested, and to show, to all who cared to take note of the fact, that she was a specially honoured one.

Margaret could not bring against her lover any charge of want of courage now. His whole face, voice, and manner underwent a change as he gave her his arm, after a cordial and significant shaking of her hand, and led her to meet his leisurely advancing eldest daughter.

“Elizabeth, this is Miss Bellew, the lady who has generously waived a prior call from

yourself and your sister, in consideration of knowing Rhoda and myself, and joined our party this evening. Where is Amy? I must have her unite with you in welcoming so esteemed a friend of mine at once."

Elizabeth Fletcher's face would have been an interesting study for a physiognomist as her father spoke, and as she stood, gazing down from her queenly height, upon the small, slender, modest looking little woman on David's arm, and whom, by an ingenious fiction, she was supposed to be welcoming to her ancestral halls. Her fine eyes had a mingled expression of astonishment and cold disapproval, her red lips were curved almost into a sneer, and even the thin patrician nose took part with the other features in saying distinctly—

"What does all this mean, and who is Miss Bellew?" Openly she said, with the coldest of all cold bows, in acknowledgment of Margaret's delightfully dignified saluta-

tion, "Miss Bellew does us honour; but I was prepared to see a very juvenile lady, a little friend of my cousin Rhoda's. Here is Amy—I suppose dinner may be ordered now."

Poor Margaret, who was beginning to feel white and rigid, and to wonder, in a half dreamy sort of way, what Mrs. Bellew would think, and how she would act if she were present, turned mechanically towards the second sister, as Miss Elizabeth walked to the bell and rang it loudly and imperiously, as women of her stamp seem to delight in always ringing bells.

"Miss Bellew, my dear Amy," again explained David; but now his face was even paler than Margaret's, and his eyes seemed unable to resist following his eldest daughter with marked displeasure in them, even while he spoke gently and kindly to his more docile youngest child.

Amy smiled and stretched out her hand

timidly in response to the introduction, while Margaret, unable to speak for a minute, took the hand and held it in a grateful clasp, scanning, with eager interest, the small, homely featured little face, which presented, in its total lack of both brilliance and outline, such a striking contrast to that of her sister.

The next moment, and just as Margaret had contrived, in a very low and unsteady voice, to say, "I hope we shall become good friends, dear," dinner was announced; and David, leaving Elizabeth and her aunt to assort and marshal all the other guests, drew Margaret's arm more securely and tenderly within his own, and led her down to the dining-room.

Although this was the first time that Elizabeth Fletcher had publicly taken her late mother's place at her father's table, and although she was still but a very young, inexperienced girl, nobody could deny that

she was thoroughly mistress of the occasion. She looked exceedingly well,—“regally handsome,” Margaret overheard Colonel Bellairs whisper to his neighbour, Mrs. Emerson ; she attended to all her guests—Miss Bellew included—she conversed graciously and intelligently with the gentlemen seated on either side of her, and in every way she manifested her entire fitness for that position in her father's house which she naturally believed she had come home to assume, and which, judging from the appearances of to-day, she would especially enjoy occupying.

Even David, angry as he had been before dinner, could not help feeling a little proud of her as he saw the impression she was producing ; and once, when he thought Margaret's spirits were rallying slightly (she was of course seated next to him, and quite away from Elizabeth) he ventured to ask her *sotto voce* what she thought of the

general appearance and manners of his eldest daughter.

"I am sure she will make a splendid woman," said Margaret, without a tinge of bitterness. "I have been studying her face, which is handsomer than, as yet to my mind, it is attractive ; but she has larger capabilities for good than can be guessed at through her untamed pride and imperiousness. I think so, at least," she added, in a lower voice ; "nevertheless, I shall have her for a deadly enemy."

"And conquer her !" replied David, in a hopeful tone, as he looked, with boundless trust and infinite admiration, into the firm, gentle face of the woman beside him. "Don't discourage me in this belief, for I am sure it will be so."

But Margaret only shook her head, with a very quiet sigh, and then turned from David to talk to her neighbour on the right, having first discovered that Mrs. Meredith,

from the opposite side of the table, had been intently watching her.

The half hour that the ladies had to spend together in the drawing-room was a very trying time for Margaret, with the unspeakable dread upon her spirits of the coming ordeal in the boudoir. Elizabeth bestowed no notice upon her at all, after they had once left the dining-room. This young lady was probably tired from her exertions at table, for she took up her position upon an isolated sofa, as soon as she had seated her guests, and appeared to think that nothing more could be required of her at present.

Margaret would fain have done the same, but Mrs. Meredith, considering Amy and Rhoda equal to the task of amusing the doctor's wife, and having herself an insuperable objection to what she called "a country magpie," thought fit to pay special attention to the stranger lady whom her brother-in-

law had so highly distinguished; and, in fulfilment of this duty, catechized poor Margaret to such a merciless extent concerning her antecedents and her present position, herself, and all her belongings, that her victim, courteous and accessible in the beginning, rebelled openly at last, and declined to undergo any further cross questioning.

Then Mrs. Meredith, who had not discovered half that she was curious about, yawned behind her jewelled hand, called to Rhoda to bring Miss Bellew some engravings to look at, and sauntered over to the distant sofa to hold a private confab with her niece Elizabeth.

Soon after this, the gentlemen joined the ladies, coffee and music were called for, and under cover of the general talking and going to and fro, David prevailed on Margaret to let him take her to the boudoir.

"I shall not bring Amy now," he said, as, after a few tender attempts at encourage-

ment, he was leaving the room to fetch the principal actor in the coming drama. "We know it will be all right with her, poor child! and I should not care for her to be a witness of any possible ill-behaviour on the part of her sister."

"No; I think one will be enough for to-night," replied Margaret with a little gasp, that for David's sake she smothered in its birth. "And be quick in bringing Miss Fletcher, please. Suspense is a bad tonic for weak nerves."

In less than five minutes from the time he had gone away, father and daughter were standing in the small room which was half in twilight shadow now, and Margaret, still seated on a low ottoman, was looking up expectantly, and with outward calmness, at them both.

"You were curious to learn," began David, addressing his daughter, and speaking with a very fair amount of firmness, "what object

I had in requiring you to come into this room with me just now. My object was to present to you this lady,—already introduced once to you by name,—as my future wife, and the highly honoured mistress of my house and home. I depend on you, Elizabeth, to receive her affectionately and dutifully, as your mother, and to unite with Amy in doing all you can to make her life amongst us a happy and a peaceful one.”

That Elizabeth had been more or less prepared, both by her own observations and Mrs. Meredith's guesses, for some such disclosure as that to which she had now been an unwilling and revolted listener, there cannot be an instant's doubt. David had meant his conduct, both before and during dinner, to prepare her for it, and he had hoped that, being thus forewarned, she would, at any rate, avoid any excessive demonstration, however plainly she might otherwise show that she was opposed to the step he contemplated.

At first it seemed as if his hopes in this respect had been well grounded. For full a minute after he had made his announcement Elizabeth remained absolutely silent, looking down, indeed, upon Margaret, but looking with a half bewildered, questioning expression, rather than a wrathful one, in her very beautiful eyes. But, as it turned out, this was but as the deceitful lull of the elements which so often heralds a devastating storm. At last she spoke, her words coming forth in short, spasmodic, passionate sentences that left no doubt of the fierce inward excitement they imperfectly expressed.

“You brought me here to insult me by asking me to receive and welcome—*was* welcome the word you used?—a stranger to us all (to yourself, even, a few weeks ago), in the place of the beloved and honoured mother I have been so unhappy as to lose! You thought seriously I could ever receive another woman as *my* mother, ever call another

woman by that sacred name, ever yield an other woman the duty of a daughter—? You must have been mad so to judge of me, and as cruelly indifferent to all my feelings and instincts, as you have shown yourself to the proprieties and decencies of civilized life. To this *lady*" (with an insolent emphasis upon the noun) "I will only say that I hope she is under some merely temporary bewitchment, as regards the external advantages you have offered her, and that she will calmly reconsider any promises you may have selfishly extorted from her. My late mother is scarcely cold in her grave. With my consent her memory shall *never* be openly dishonoured. To me, her eldest daughter, she left her place at the head of this establishment. I claim it as my inalienable right, and whether my claim is allowed or not, I solemnly swear, here in the presence of you both, that I will never, never receive or acknowledge either this or any other woman in

the universe as my mother, and I will do my very utmost to incite Amy to the same resolve. Miss Bellew," (with a low mocking curtsy,) "I have the honour of wishing you good evening, my guests in the drawing-room not being aware of the interesting ceremony that has detained me here."

And before her sorely grieved and indignant father could speak, or Margaret (faint and dizzy from emotion) could decide whether she should speak or not, the young lady had swept imperiously out of the room, leaving the door wide open behind her.

David's first act was to shut this door securely. Then, forgetful of all but the outraged feelings of his pale, dumb, Margaret, he sank on a chair beside her, clasped both her cold hands tightly in his own, and poured forth such a passionate torrent of invective against his daughter, mingled with such bitter self accusations at having exposed the woman he loved to that daugh-

ter's insult and gross impertinence, that Margaret, true to her nature, and to the one new and special duty she had woven into her life, stopped him, with a faint smile at last, and told him he was making the worst of everything.

"For, though Miss Fletcher has been unscrupulous in her language, and rude in her manners," she said mildly, and with an effort, which David could appreciate, to steady her quivering voice; "and though she has hurt me badly, we must remember that you asked of her, and without preparation, what not one grown up girl in ten thousand would have been disposed to concede. Stepmothers are *always* odious in prospect, even when they become tolerated upon a nearer view. And your daughter spoke truly when she said I was a stranger to you all. In thinking of me and of my feelings, you perhaps, a little underrated the bitterness of the pill you required

this poor motherless girl to swallow, and to swallow graciously at a moment's notice. It is in her favour, and to her praise, that she loved her own mother, and clings fondly to her memory. The worst feature of her conduct is, I think, her disrespect to you, her father, and this I shall find it hard to forgive. You must believe my solemn assertion that I forgive your child fully and freely all the cruelties she has to-night heaped upon me. And now, comfort yourself, my poor David! return to your guests, and, in mercy to my physical exhaustion, let me go home."

David Fletcher was not a strong man; his sensitiveness had ever dominated lamentably over all the nervous energy and masculine fibre of his character; and it might safely be predicted of him that when any occasion arose for the calling forth of this superabundant sensitiveness, he would show himself weaker than a woman. He did so

now, at what he called Margaret's angelic goodness, as contrasted with Elizabeth's shameful behaviour, and his own evil temper; and so stormy and powerful was his emotion, that Margaret had a harder task than had ever in her life been assigned her in soothing him even into outward composure, and persuading him that it was imperative he should show himself quickly in the drawing-room. Man-like he took unfair advantage of her tenderness and pity to extort from her (before he would listen to reason) a sacred promise that she would let nothing that had occurred to-night, or that might occur in the coming days, alter, by a hair's breadth, the relations between herself and him; nay, that she would hasten the ending of all these family broils and differences by consenting to marry him early in the autumn—in September, at latest.


“So be it, then,” said poor tired Margaret,

in conclusion ; “ only return to your waiting friends now ; be patient and indulgent with Elizabeth—and, above all, let me go home ! ”

CHAPTER VI.

SHADOWS IN THE PATHWAY.

Mrs. BELLEW had quite enough of the curiosity of her sex to be impatient, on the arrival of her daughter at Abbotsmead, to hear all that Margaret was willing to tell her. It need scarcely be said that she received but a very modified version of what had actually occurred at the Hall; for even this drew forth such strong language, such essentially womanish abuse of Miss Elizabeth, and such bitter scorning of her own daughter for not asserting herself and throwing the whole thing over, that Margaret, weary and jaded almost



past endurance before, was driven to the verge of desperation now, and entreated piteously that her mother would sign a truce for this one night, and let her go quietly to bed.

"Oh, go to bed, by all means, you poor ghost from a banquet!" scoffed Mrs. Bellew, even while her voice was expressive of some degree of pity and sympathy. "It's my opinion that you will *take* to your bed, if you are to be worried and tortured by these insolent fine ladies much longer, and so I shall tell David Fletcher, if he shows his sentimental face here again in a hurry. Why, a man with any spirit in him would have horsewhipped that girl on the spot, with the first uncivil word she had dared address to you. I haven't common patience with such a poor, tame creature, and that's the truth!"

Perhaps Margaret, on her sleepless pillow that night, may have pondered more seriously

and sadly than she had yet done on the undeniable fact that the man to whom she was to devote her life, the man to whom she had given her heart's warmest love, had, in truth, but a feeble spirit of his own; and that it would tax her powers and energies to the utmost, even if they were found equal to the strain, to make his life the really bright and happy one which, in her dreams, she had shadowed forth for him—happier than the past it might indeed be, for her affection alone would surely suffice to ensure this result; but could' she lift him to a higher level, impart to him energy, self-reliance, and cheerful hope? Or would her life's work, the work she had deliberately and joyfully chosen, be, after all, a failure instead of a success?

It was a solemn doubt to arise at this eleventh hour, but I suppose it would have come to any woman who was as much in earnest as Margaret, and to whom living

would have lost its meaning had it included the ill performance of any trying task she had set her woman's hands to do.

It was quite a feather in Mrs. Bellew's cap, the partial fulfilment, at any rate, of her cheering prediction, when the next morning Margaret declared herself unable to come down to breakfast, and sent for a cup of tea in bed. She had not slept, and her head was aching desperately. There was nothing for it but utter quiet and a darkened room for some hours at least; and though the novelty of such a state of things disturbed Mrs. Bellew a good deal, she had the sense to know that it was inevitable, and to acquiesce without much grumbling, except to Priscilla, who was distantly sympathetic down stairs, and tenderly assiduous to the invalid above, the truth being that she would have gone through fire and water for her young lady, albeit she kept this devoted-

ness to herself, unless a special occasion like the present called it forth.

The result was that Margaret, in her pain and helplessness this morning, got an abundance of kind and zealous attention, including (which is a rare thing where ordinary servants are concerned) the absence of all noise and bustle in the house while she was trying to sleep. She did manage to sleep a little at last, and was able to get up and come down stairs by dinner-time, looking very white and corpse-like still, but protesting that she was much better, and only wanting a brisk walk, which she would take in the afternoon, to revive her entirely.

"You shall have a drive," exclaimed Mrs. Bellew, speaking very sharply and rapidly, as if the announcement of so very unusual an indulgence was something to be ashamed of. "With that pinched face I am sure you are not fit for walking, and I have a fancy for seeing this cemetery we hear so

much of. Priscilla can go into Ditchley and order the carriage while we have our dinner; it will be a nice walk for her."

Margaret's gratitude would have appeared out of all proportion to the boon about to be conferred, to any one who was unacquainted with Mrs. Bellew's character, and the very exceptional nature of her present suggestion. The daughter was indeed quite touched by her mother's extraordinary kindness; and, in the softening of her feelings, she confided to her more than she had done the night before concerning the interview in the boudoir, repeating what she had said to Mr. Fletcher in the way of excuses for Elizabeth's conduct, and assuring her somewhat incredulous listener that she was fully prepared for, and armed against, any trials she should have to encounter in the future from her step-daughters. Finally, Margaret broke gently to her mother—this was during their pleasant drive to the ceme-

tery—that she had agreed to Mr. Fletcher's wish that their marriage should take place in September.

“Well, I expected no less,” replied Mrs. Bellew, shortly; “and though I hate this marriage as you know, I am no friend to long engagements, especially when both parties have got over their first youth. We shall have to begin thinking about your *trousseau* pretty soon. Of course I must set aside all my other needlework, that I may help you in earnest.”

“Oh, you are very good,” said Margaret, with so little interest in this part of the subject as yet, that she wished her mother had not remembered it; “and I shall be infinitely thankful for your assistance when the time comes to need it—but we have three months before us yet, all the best of the summer—and I should like to devote the last days of my spinstership,” (she was going to say “freedom,” till she suddenly bethought

herself, with a smile, that she never had been free), "to you, rather than to dress-making and millinery. I have, you know, a little money of my own put by, the remnant of my god-father's legacy, and this will be enough for my wedding clothes, and their making into the bargain. We can do the plain sewing at home, but that need not be a long affair. Don't let us think of it yet."

"As you please," answered Mrs. Bellew, but her tone was colder and stiffer than it had been till now, and Margaret saw plainly that her off-hand suggestions, though they were suffered to remain unchallenged, had met with neither sympathy nor approval.

The ladies left their vehicle to wait for them at the outer gates, while they took a slow and leisurely walk round the cemetery. Mrs. Bellew liked occasionally a stroll through a churchyard, or any place of graves, and to read the different inscriptions upon the tomb-

stones. It took her now a long time to explore the lower division of the ground, where the graves were thickest, and each one had a verse or a text that claimed her attention. Margaret hoped she would not propose mounting the hill to the cypresses. It was a steep climb, and the day was very warm ; and she did not want her mother to have a text for either preaching or prophesying suggested to her by the one grave over which she had herself stood, not long ago, in sad and solemn meditation.

But Mrs. Bellew had come to see the whole cemetery, not a part of it only, and having inquired whether Margaret felt equal to further walking, she announced her intention of mounting the hill, and having a look at the late Mrs. Fletcher's tombstone.

As they came in sight of it, grateful now for the cool shade of the cypresses, and walking very slowly, Margaret's heart suddenly gave a leap, while her face lost the very

small amount of colour it had gained in the fresh air, for just turning away from the grave on which lay thickly strewn a perfect shower of white hot-house flowers, was Elizabeth Fletcher, her veil carelessly thrown back, tears raining down her cheeks, and her entire aspect as suggestive of bitter grief and despondency, as if her bereavement had been of yesterday's date, instead of something more than a whole year old.

She came straight on, in the same path which the other ladies were pursuing, without seeming at all conscious that she was not alone. Her eyes were bent on the ground, her step was listless and full of weariness, and there was, altogether, a strange pre-occupation about the girl, which would naturally have excited the curiosity of even an indifferent beholder.

Mrs. Bellew had only time to guess who it was, to glance inquiringly at Margaret for a confirmation of her suspicion, before

Miss Fletcher had arrived within a few paces of them, and had abruptly lifted her head, with a frown and a heightened colour, at the sudden discovery of intruders on her privacy.

Margaret half stopped, held her breath, and waited, without actually turning her eyes upon Elizabeth, for some sign of recognition, even if it were only a bow of the most distant and chilling kind.

But none came. It might be that Miss Fletcher really did not identify the pale little woman in a simple walking dress, and with her veil down (whose inopportune crossing of her path just now was an offence to her in a small way), with the lady in elegant evening costume and dignified demeanour whom she had insulted in her father's house the night before. Anyhow, she passed on like a shadow, making no sign, and Margaret, who but for her mother's presence, would gladly have been spared the haughty greet-

ing which alone she could have expected from her enemy, hazarded at once the suggestion that the young lady had not known her again.

“ Fudge !” remarked Mrs. Bellew, with an ironical laugh and a surreptitious backward glance at the slowly retreating figure. “ She knew you fast enough, the insolent vixen ! and she is glorying in the chance she has had of putting a new slight upon you. But there is another thing, in reference to this Madam Elizabeth, which strikes me forcibly, —and you mark my words if they don’t turn out to be correct. The girl has something on her mind, over and above her dislike to receiving a step-mother, and her regret for the mother who lies buried here. She has a personal grief of some sort, Margaret ; I would stake my life on the fact. If it were not for this conviction, I should think, as you are doing, that rebellion against her father’s second marriage was the sole cause

of the tears and agitation in which we found her. But you need not fret yourself into fiddlestrings over any such notion. She does rebel of course ; she detests your very name ; she would probably move Heaven and earth to get you out of the way,—but her tears, and her listless walk, and her very evident mental dejection have very little to do with you, though, in the end, you may have something to do with them, when the girl comes, even nominally, under your authority.”

Anyhow, this accidental meeting had not tended to raise poor Margaret's spirits, and though she tried hard, for her mother's sake, to keep a brave front for the rest of the day, it was easy to see that she was passing through troubled waters, and to predict that the usually blissful season of courtship would not prove a dangerously exhilarating time for her.

The next morning Rhoda came down alone

to Abbotsmead to say good-bye. She and her mother were returning to London almost immediately, the latter owning privately to her daughter that she could not stand the unutterable dullness of the place, and that her brother-in-law himself was insupportable to her.

“It is a miserable house just now,” said Rhoda in quite a tearful voice, for she had learned to love her tender-hearted uncle, and to be unfeignedly sorry at having to leave him under such gloomy circumstances. “Elizabeth and her father never address each other except on compulsion ; Amy does not know which side to take ; uncle is angry and depressed by turns ; and, in short, everything appears to be going wrong. By-the-by, uncle said I was to tell you he should come down and bring Amy, at least, to-morrow. He is so afraid you are hopelessly hurt at Elizabeth’s conduct. He is always thinking and fretting about you, and then he comes and

talks to me. I don't know what he will do when I am gone, till you are there to comfort him, dear Miss Bellew—oh, you must not mind my speaking openly, now we are parting. I do feel so very much for Uncle David, and for you, too, indeed, for I doubt you have a rough path before you ; and yet if you can realize that it *is* your appointed pathway, you will learn to love it, will you not? I remember our talk the first day we ever met.”

“I shall love it, if I can make your uncle happy,” said Margaret, with an earnestness that had lost a little of its hopeful element ; “but I can no longer shut my eyes to the fact that there will be powerful influences arrayed against me. If Elizabeth were to marry early, I should have some chance.”

This was quite a random observation, and spoken without a thought of its having any effect on Rhoda, who, however, to Margaret's astonishment, grew very red for a

moment, and then said, bringing out her words with hesitation and evident pain,

“ I think I ought to be frank with you, to tell you at least the very little I know concerning a matter that is giving me the greatest anxiety, and that I dare not mention to Uncle David, because mamma has peremptorily forbidden my doing so. But you, of course, she never had an idea of as a possible confidante of mine, and yet you may, by-and-by, have means of watching and hindering if I warn you now. The truth is, I am terribly afraid, from something mamma let fall in my hearing, that Herbert—my brother, you know—has been making advances to Elizabeth, and that she is disposed to favour him, even while aware of the sad life he has led, of his debts (which mamma has neither the means nor the will to pay), of his wild companions, and of his utter unworthiness generally. Dear Miss Bellew,” continued the pure young sister now, tears

choking her voice, "this is a sore subject with me, and one I never voluntarily approach, for I loved my brother dearly when we were children together, and his reckless career has embittered every hour of my life since I knew of it. If Elizabeth marries him, she must be the most miserable woman and wife in the whole world. He cares for nobody but himself; he makes a boast of despising all women, and yet of having the power, which I fear is partly true, of making them all adore and worship him. He is singularly handsome, and can be wonderfully fascinating when it suits him. Mamma idolizes her son, and would, I greatly fear, sacrifice a dozen nieces, were it possible, to do him any good. If he really wants Elizabeth, it is for her money, which he would squander in less than a year. Mamma has declared to me that she will not encourage Herbert in seeking his cousin, but admits her belief that Elizabeth

is fond of him. I am certain such a marriage would break Uncle David's heart, as he has been told what my brother is; and yet here the matter stands; and what I dread most is that Elizabeth may make her father's marrying again an excuse for doing something rash. What can we do to save her? What can *you* do, I mean, for I have no power or influence at home, and I don't expect I shall be allowed to come here again very soon."

Thick and fast, indeed, poor Margaret's difficulties and perplexities seemed crowding upon her. Turn which way she would, the skies were full of clouds and portents, and the worst of it was, her strength appeared to diminish, rather than to increase, with the demands made upon it.

"May I repeat to your uncle," she asked, after warmly thanking Rhoda for the trust she had put in her, "any part of what you have now told me? I see no other way,

as yet, of having this infatuated Elizabeth watched over."

"No," replied Rhoda quickly; "for that would be the same as if I told him myself, and equivalent to the breaking of my promise to my mother. All you can do is to encourage him to speak freely to you of his family and connections, and then, should he express any fear of Herbert, as regards Elizabeth (I know he had a dread of their meeting in Paris), you might suggest watchfulness of her correspondence, and so on. More than this you cannot do at present, but much may, and I earnestly hope *will*, be in your power by-and-by. I need not tell you how I shall pray that this 'by-and-by' may be a succession of long and happy years to you and my dear uncle; but, as I have the bad reputation of being a female preacher, let me leave with you, dear Miss Bellew, one short and simple text to take with you into the new, untried life that is

before you. I will not repeat it now, for I must go and bid Mrs. Bellew farewell also, and you are looking like a poor white lily that the winds and the rains have been beating upon and crushing ; but you will find it in the first chapter of the epistle of James, and the fifth verse. I will write to you sometimes if you will permit it, and should be more than enchanted if you would occasionally send a line to me. Perhaps in the coming years we may meet again, and know each other better."

"It will be one of my most cherished hopes, dear Rhoda," said Margaret, kissing her departing friend with warm affection ; "and I shall have managed badly indeed, if, in any home called mine, you are not always a fondly welcomed guest."

Rhoda quite won Mrs. Bellew's heart by the emotion she exhibited in leaving her friends at Abbostmead, that lady surpassing herself on the occasion by walking as far as

the gate with her half-sobbing visitor, and actually plucking for her the first rose that had bloomed in the Abbotsmead garden that season.

CHAPTER VII.

MRS. BELLEW'S HAPPY SUGGESTION.

MR. FLETCHER came down the next day, bringing Amy with him as he had promised ; but the visit was not productive of much satisfaction or enjoyment to any of them—not even to David himself—for he thought Margaret looking miserably ill, which in truth she was ; and, attributing this wholly to the agitation she had undergone in his house, he fretted and fumed about it in quite a vexatious way, turning a deaf ear to all poor Margaret's assurances that her indisposition was of the most trivial nature, and declaring his conviction that she was

very seriously ill, and that she would get worse, and possibly die to complete his wretchedness.

"No, I don't think I am a dying subject," said Margaret, trying to laugh, but really vanquished for once by the strange oppression on her spirits—"there is plenty of life in me yet, only just now the waters are running a little low, and you don't see any sparkling bubbles upon the surface."

As the visitors had called at a proper hour, Mrs. Bellew received them in the drawing-room, and, finding Amy meek and inoffensive, she had been really doing her best to entertain the daughter, while the father lured Margaret apart, and gave her the full benefit of his lively imaginings. But Amy Fletcher, though possessed of many endearing qualities, had a small, timid soul, and all the time she was at Abbotsmead she was thinking of the rating and the snubbing she should get by-and-by from

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Elizabeth, for not having more firmly resisted David's wish to bring her to call on Miss Bellew. Left to herself, Amy probably would not have cared a great deal whether her father had married again or not, and in her very secret heart she was disposed to think the lady he had chosen a very nice and agreeable person ; but under Elizabeth's influence, and guided by her judgment, especially now that Rhoda was away, the poor little girl was afraid either to trust her own opinion, or to seem in the smallest degree to be going over to the side of her father and the enemy.

The result of this very uncomfortable state of mind was that she remained dull and preoccupied during the whole visit, trying every now and then to awake up to an interest in what Mrs. Bellew was saying to her, but always relapsing into dreaminess in a minute or two, and irritating her not over-patient hostess intensely.

Margaret found no opportunity of giving David the least hint about Elizabeth. The very mention to-day of his eldest daughter's name excited and angered him, as he believed her conduct to be the sole cause of his Margaret's woe-begone looks and melancholy spirits. Indeed, if he had entertained any doubt on this subject in the beginning, he would have had to dismiss it in the end, as Mrs. Bellew, faithful to her word, seized an opportunity, while her daughter was showing a few sketches she had taken in the neighbourhood to Amy (after discovering that drawing was her favourite study), to say to him, in her loudest and jerkiest voice, pointing significantly to Margaret—

“I can't compliment you on the good that young lady got at your house the other evening. She came home like a corpse just dug up from her grave, and she has been like a troubled ghost ever since. Now, if

you'll be advised by me, you'll leave her in peace for a week or two. She has always had capital health, but then she has lived a life totally free from excitement. Excitement and agitation are too new in her experience to be otherwise than seriously injurious. She wants absolute quiet now, till this disturbance of the nerves has subsided. Therefore, I repeat, without wishing either to offend or alarm you—keep away for a bit. You may safely trust her with her own mother. You shall hear how she is getting on, and by-and-by things may be mended. I am sure you must have plenty to do at home in looking after your own daughter. We met her in the cemetery the other day, and I told Margaret then that the girl had something on her mind in excess of her anger against you. This is no business of mine, and I should be very sorry if it were; but men rarely go about with their eyes open to what is passing under

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their noses ; and so I have thought it as well to warn you, and give you something to do. It is to be hoped that the old proverb, 'A word to the wise,' will hold good in this case."

Whether David Fletcher would remember and appreciate, later, the timely hint he had now received concerning his rebellious daughter, must remain an open question. At the present moment his vexed and tortured mind absolutely rejected it, being quite unable to contain more distress and apprehension than Mrs. Bellew's first plain and unstudied words, in reference to Margaret, had excited.

He went away, looking the very picture of despair, and entreating Mrs. Bellew, who had cut him rather short when he begged to be allowed to send the carriage every day for Margaret to have a drive, to lose no time in consulting a doctor.

"I think," said Mrs. Bellew, who I am

afraid was not averse to seeing this poor David upon the rack, "that if medical advice is necessary, I shall send her to London to be treated by a physician. I have no great opinion of your little country apothecaries, and Dr. Emerson, though he writes M.D. after his name, is no better than the rest of them."

Margaret, who had heard the concluding part only of this last dialogue between her mother and David, was sorry that the former should have made a statement so calculated to increase his anxiety, and (as she believed) having such a purely mushroom origin in the mind of the speaker. But in a few days she had to acknowledge that she had wronged Mrs. Bellew with regard to this suspicion. As the ladies sat at work together one morning (Margaret unable to resist a frequent yawn, and the pressure of her hand to her still aching head), the mother abruptly exclaimed—

"I suppose your old friend, Mrs. Dormer, would make no difficulty about receiving you at her house in London for a week or so, if you were to suggest going? She was always inviting you at one time."

Margaret let fall her work in utter astonishment.

"She would be very glad to have me, I believe; but what do you mean by your inquiry? I don't want to go to London, or to go anywhere."

"Possibly not, but your wanting or not wanting to go is neither here nor there. The question is, and it has been engrossing me for some time—would it not be best for you to go for awhile? You are very far from well, and I should like you to have proper advice—that is the first thing; the next is, that the change of scene alone, and the distance there will be between you and the people who have made you ill, *must* be beneficial to you; and the third and last is,

that you will save no end of money, and have a far wider choice, by buying your wedding outfit in London. If you feel equal to the journey, I should really advise your writing to-night, and asking Mrs. Dormer whether she can be prepared for you by Friday. Then, about Monday, you can take her with you to the city to purchase all the materials required for your under clothing, and send the parcel down to me at once. You know when I have work that must be done, I cannot rest till I have at least made a beginning of it."

Margaret did know this with a very accurate knowledge, and she knew too, or guessed, that, however true it was that her mother wished her to have the benefit of change and skilful medical advice, the real origin of the desire to send her to London just now, was this curious and incessant itching of the fingers to set about the hemming, and the sewing, and the tucking,

which, for the next two months would fill the worker's life with a more vivid interest than all the glories and sweetnesses of the passing summer, and compensate, in a great measure, for the many disappointments and vexations and fears that, in her view of the case, were inseparably associated with the coming marriage.

But Margaret was not a hard or severe judge of the weaknesses of her fellow-creatures, and she thanked her mother now as warmly for her kindness in suggesting so agreeable a change, as if the primary motive had been altogether hidden from her. There were many reasons why the idea of visiting her old friend at this time was pleasant to Margaret. She was the only very intimate friend she had ever had, and when Caroline Percy became Mrs. Dormer, and had a host of new interests and occupations to draw her from her early companions, Margaret had

missed her sorely, and had only gradually learned to dispense with the sympathy and keen interest in all the trivial events of her quiet life, which the elder girl had been ever so ready to feel and express. They had kept up a disjointed correspondence since Caroline's marriage, but Margaret could confide no secrets, at any rate on paper, to a woman with a husband, and though, as Mrs. Bellew had remembered, Mrs. Dormer had, in the beginning, repeatedly invited her old friend to visit her, such an event had never taken place, and latterly Margaret had ceased to have any hope of it.

Feeling really in urgent need of some change now, some infusion into her mind of fresh thoughts, new ideas, healthy interests, that should belong wholly to other people, and be quite distinct from those purely personal ones which had been engrossing her, to her own mental and physical hurt, of late, Margaret was unfeignedly rejoiced, as I have

said, at the chance afforded her of getting away for a time from Abbotsmead and its tread-mill course of never varying duties. She yearned for real sympathy, for the privilege of talking freely to one who would take a candid, dispassionate view of her circumstances, about all that hidden future which sometimes, in these recent days, had clothed itself in the gloomiest hues to her shrinking eyes. She knew that Caroline Dormer would be a soothing influence in every way, that she would give warm sympathy, friendly counsel, cheering words, and take a lively personal interest in the minutest details of the somewhat uncommon romance that her friend had to lay before her. There was, in fact, no drawback at all to the pleasantness of the prospect so abruptly opened to poor tired Margaret, except the belief that David would very greatly dislike her leaving the neighbourhood just now. That this conviction did not hinder the writing and the sending

of her letter to Mrs. Dormer that same evening, must not be taken as the slightest proof of growing coldness to her future husband, or even indifference as regarded his wishes. It simply implied that her own judgment was so clearly in favour of the plan that, having also her mother's decided approval to back her, she thought it best to get the matter finally settled before telling him anything about it.

In two days a cordial affirmative answer to her request arrived from Mrs. Dormer, and then Margaret wrote to David, warning him of her speedy departure, assuring him she should get quite well in London, furnishing him with her address there, and bidding him an affectionate, cheerful good-bye.

Mrs. Bellew felt even this comparatively short parting from her daughter; but she indulged in no demonstrations, and her last words had reference to the calicoes and cam-

MRS. BELLEW'S HAPPY SUGGESTION. 119

brics and flannels that were to be bought as soon as possible at a particular shop in the city, and sent down to Abbotsmead for her to begin upon.

CHAPTER VIII.

MISS ELIZABETH GETTING THE WORST OF IT.

MARGARET had been gone about a fortnight, and all her letters, both to her mother and to David, had spoken of improved health, of enjoyment in the society of her friend, of busy days filled with sight-seeing, drives, and pleasant excursions, and, finally, of her hope that she was not wanted yet at Ditchley, as neither Mr. nor Mrs. Dormer would suffer the most distant mention of a termination to her visit, and she could not help the conviction herself that the total change was doing her a world of good.

Mrs. Bellew did not grumble at this state-

of things. She had all her work well in hand now, and was very happy over it, sometimes in the long sultry afternoons having up Priscilla to help with the easiest parts, and on these occasions enlarging to her mutely-listening handmaiden on the never-to-be-too-highly-estimated advantages of becoming, early in life, a proficient in all kinds of needlework. If she missed the very gentle, sweet-tempered daughter, who had been her life-long companion, and, till recently, almost slavishly submissive to her every wish and whim, she had, at least, the consolation of feeling that she was working for her from early morning till dewy eve, and that the more she could accomplish now the less there would be for Margaret to do, or to pay for having done for her, by-and-by. And there was yet another reason, though perhaps scarcely so creditable an one, for Mrs. Bellew's quiet acquiescence in her daughter's prolonged absence. She knew

that it was a source of annoyance and perpetual worry to David Fletcher, who, ever too ready to set a low value on himself, and to mistrust the genuineness of any regard he might seem, for a time, to have inspired, could not help taking this voluntary absence as a token that his Margaret's love was failing him just when he most needed it; and believing that, after all the late fair, sweet promises of destiny, he was to be stranded again on an utterly desert shore.

He had come down one afternoon to Abbotsmead, when his black fit was strongest upon him. He had felt that he *must* give some expression to his misery and fears to Margaret's mother. She might be as disagreeable as she liked; she might snarl and growl to her heart's content—he rather hoped she would—but, at any rate, he should glean from her words and manner some inkling of the truth, supposing the truth to be what his dark and troubled fancies

continually pictured it in these sad and uncomfortable days.

But Mrs. Bellew was neither explanatory (in point of fact she had nothing to explain), nor sympathetic, nor anything but coldly polite to her future son-in-law. She acknowledged that Margaret was very happy in London, and had no wish to return to Ditchley. The doctor she had consulted on first going up had recommended as much amusement and diversity of society as she could possibly get, that the nerves, which had been overstrained, might recover their tone. He had said that her constitution was good, but the tendency to nervous excitement, and consequent exhaustion, very much out of proportion to her bodily strength.

“And as she is likely to have a somewhat undue share of nervous excitement by-and-by,” continued Mrs. Bellew, in a tone that fixed the reproach of this anticipated cala-

imity wholly on poor heart-sick David, "the least we can do is to let her enjoy and benefit by her little hour of freedom and sunshine. For my part, though I have every right to claim her exclusive companionship for the few weeks during which I may still venture to call my child my own, I have resolved not to lift my finger to bring her back an hour before she is ready to come. Anything short of this I should consider gross and unpardonable selfishness."

So David Fletcher had to return to his dismal home without having picked up a single grain of comfort, and feeling, moreover, that Mrs. Bellew had effectually sealed his lips against any future murmurs or expressions of discontent on the subject of Margaret's absence. Of course the mother was right, and he was wrong. It *would* be unpardonable selfishness to wish to deprive the woman he loved of one fraction of the holiday she was evidently enjoying so

thoroughly, and which was as evidently brightening her spirits, and doing her good in every way. What could she possibly gain by hastening her return to Ditchley? The rumour of her engagement to Mr. Fletcher, the widower, had somehow got abroad, and she would be an object of idle curiosity, and speculation, and gossiping remark, to every soul in the place. Then, there was Elizabeth, still bitterly and passionately opposed to the very mention of her father's marriage, refusing, in the most coldly decided terms, ever to acknowledge Miss Bellew as her step-mother, taunting David, whenever the vexed topic was broached at the Hall, with not having even chosen a lady in his own rank of life; and, in short, manifesting, in every way, the kind of temper which promised as much humiliation, distress, and pain to poor Margaret, both now and hereafter, as it was in one

woman's power to secure, through ill-will and malice, to another.

David was quite aware, when he reflected calmly about the matter, that there was nothing, except the chance of again seeing him from time to time, to tempt Margaret to shorten her London visit; and in his present mood he questioned whether this solitary advantage would have very much weight with her. And yet, poor man! he yearned to have her near him again; he hungered and thirsted for her soothing presence, for her gentle words, for her tender looks, as a sick man longs for health, or a benighted traveller for the break of day.

It was a little cruel of Mrs. Bellew to rejoice in his misery, but as some excuse for her apparent hard heartedness it must be explained that Mr. Spenser had come back to Ditchley, that he had called at Abbotsmead for a confirmation of the report he had heard on reaching home, that he had looked

exceedingly unhappy and depressed during the whole visit, and had said, on leaving, that he hoped it would not be taken as a slight, or as an unfriendly act on his part, if he excused himself from performing the marriage ceremony by-and-by.

Was it not very natural that Mrs. Bellew, who thought all the world of this charming ecclesiastic, should draw invidious comparisons when left alone, and sigh dismally the next time she sat down to her herring-boning and tucking, in the reflection that all these useful and exquisitely wrought garments were not destined to have their place amongst the *trousseau* of a rector's wife!

The luckless Mr. Perkins, her landlord, calling on business the day after her interview with Mr. Spenser, got snubbed unmercifully, when he ventured, in the most respectful terms, to proffer his humble congratulations on Miss Margaret's engagement.

Possibly Mrs. Bellew had wit enough to guess that this soft-hearted man's twaddling talk to Magaret about David Fletcher and his sorrows, during those long spring mornings in the garden, had paved the way for the romantic interest she had, at so early a date, conceived for him. Anyhow, the congratulations of poor Mr. Perkins were most ungraciously received, and he left the lady's presence with the conviction that he had better have held his tongue till he saw his dear Miss Margaret herself, and with the wonder strong upon him of what Mr. Fletcher could possibly have done to offend the stiff old woman of Abbotsmead.

The trivial events I have gone a little back to record, had all taken place in that first fortnight of Margaret's absence, alluded to at the commencement of this chapter. The one more important incident which occurred after these, I have now to relate in its turn.

Mrs. Bellew had just settled herself to her work one afternoon—she always kept to the dining-room now for the convenience of the large table and the comparative shadiness of this apartment—when Priscilla, who was to have joined her mistress as soon as she could finish down stairs, abruptly opened the door, and, in rather a mysterious voice, announced:

“Miss Fletcher, ma’am, has called, and would be glad to speak to you. I have put her in the drawing-room, and told her I would let you know.”

Mrs. Bellew’s face flushed hotly. Her servant’s manner, no less than her words, conveyed the idea that she understood this was no ordinary visit, no friendly matter of course call, such as the Ditchley ladies were in the habit of making at Abbotsmead, but probably some hostile movement, intended to vex or insult the mother of the lady who was presumptuous and rash enough to dream of becoming *her* mother.

“Miss Fletcher may wait,” was the sharp, angry answer. “If she were the Queen, I would not go to her till I have finished the round of this petticoat.”

Priscilla retired, and the click, click, of the needle, and the rapid drawing of the thread (whose strength was pretty severely tested on the occasion) went on uninterruptedly for another ten minutes. Then the round was completed, and the worker, after leisurely contemplating her work, and shaking out the petticoat, rose slowly, opened the windows of the room a little wider, took in a good whiff of such air as was to be obtained, and finally walked, with a rigid, uncompromising step and face, to her interview with Miss Elizabeth, in the drawing-room.

The thick dark blinds of this state chamber being all pulled down to preserve the furniture, it was difficult, when the ladies first met, for either of them to scan the features of the other. That Miss Fletcher

had been growing wildly impatient might be gathered from the fact that she was beating a fierce tattoo with the end of her sunshade upon the carpet, and that her proud head was slightly inclined in a listening attitude towards the door. As the handle of this door was turned, she erected her head, but persevered in the tapping on the floor, till Mrs. Bellew had advanced some paces into the room. No doubt the indignant young lady would infinitely have preferred saying, in her imperious voice, "What do you mean by keeping me waiting your convenience, in this way?" but her breeding forbidding such open insolence, she had no resource but to let her actions and her looks interpret for her, and they did their work exceedingly well.

As the lady of the house came near—she too, exhibiting the mien and tread of one who meant to hold her own—Miss Elizabeth made a pretence of rising from her chair,

and bowing, in the very stiffest and iciest fashion. Then she said—

“I must apologize, I believe, for having chosen an unfortunate hour for my visit. I have interrupted, I fear, some important engagement of Mrs. Bellew’s.”

This was spoken ironically, of course, and intended to shame Mrs. Bellew for having made so great a lady wait. But in this effect it failed signally, as Miss Elizabeth had to admit to herself the moment her hostess replied to her.

“All my engagements,” she said, in her bluntest manner, “are sufficiently important to myself to make needless interruption vexatious; but if I can do anything to serve or oblige my neighbours, I reckon the interruption atoned for. What can I have the honour of doing for Miss Fletcher at the present time?”

She had taken a seat now, and was looking her young haughty visitor steadily and

inquiringly in the face. Elizabeth flinched a little before that cool and utterly fearless scrutiny. She had probably expected another type of woman from the one she had to deal with.

Rallying her forces, however, and disgusted with herself for being taken unawares, Miss Fletcher fixed her own proud eyes full on the guarded eyes of her *vis-à-vis*, and said, in a slow, distinct voice, which she could not keep from trembling—

“I don’t know yet that you can or will do anything for me. I came to you almost in desperation, and hoping against hope that some good might arise from it. You are the mother of the lady my father wishes to raise to my own dead mother’s place. His marrying again at all is cruel, is monstrous, with daughters grown up and able to head his establishment. Neither myself nor my sister can ever receive a new mother; the idea is simply revolting, and your daughter

will strangely mistake her own interest if she persists in justifying Mr. Fletcher in his mad infatuation. I have heard recently that you are not in favour of the marriage, that you disapprove of widowers marrying again at all. If this is true, why cannot you influence or coerce your daughter, whom people about here call gentle and yielding in character? Why should my sister and I be made miserable for life, and alienated more than we are at present from our father, when such a calamity can be prevented by any means? Nobody believes, or ever will believe, that Miss Bellew cares a straw for Mr. Fletcher himself; and the external advantages she would gain as his wife would be more than counterbalanced by the misery and confusion that would ensue from a house divided. Mrs. Bellew," concluded the girl, becoming more girl-like and natural as she warmed with her subject, and forgot, for the moment, that one of her great aims had

been to impress Margaret's mother with her dignity and importance, "Mrs. Bellew, you *must* see all this in the same light that I do. Oh, can you not help me? Can you not, at least, earnestly *advise* your daughter to withdraw from her most rash and unfortunate engagement?"

Here Miss Fletcher paused, sat very still in her chair (she had been restless and fidgetty all the time she was speaking), and gazing eagerly into the face opposite to her, which had revealed nothing as yet, waited impatiently for the answer.

Very quietly, and without the least sign of having been either astonished or moved by her visitor's excited appeal, she asked—

"Does your father know of your coming here to-day, and of the nature of your errand?"

"Not very likely," said Elizabeth, who evidently did not approve of the tone or manner of her questioner; "but this is not

extraordinary, considering that he takes no interest in any of my proceedings. We are not on those terms which favour confidence on either side, and I have every right to act in accordance with my own judgment."

"That is your opinion," remarked Mrs. Bellew, still speaking very calmly, and as if the discussion to which she had been invited were one of no particular interest to her; "but you are a mere girl in years, Miss Fletcher, and may learn to think differently on many points by-and-by. I hope you will. I don't fancy your present views and feelings tend to make you very happy. I never saw so young a girl as yourself, enriched with health and every other outward blessing, look half so dismal and uncomfortable as you do. It gave me quite a turn—your face I mean—the day I met you in the cemetery. If I were young and rich and handsome, I think I would contrive to let the world know I appreciated these advantages. But, I beg

your pardon ; you are waiting to make some remark."

"I am waiting to say," exclaimed Miss Elizabeth, with eyes full of wrath, and a voice full of passion, "that I did not come here to-day to have either my face or my feelings commented on by a stranger. I am not in the habit of being admonished or preached to by *any one*, and I have no inclination to submit to it. If you have no other answer to give than this to the earnest request I made to you, in all good faith, I may as well go at once, bitterly regretting that I should ever have come on such a fool's errand. The thought would not have occurred to me, understand, had I not been told that you hated this marriage, and strongly disapproved of any widow or widower marrying again."

"I was really not aware," said Mrs. Bellew, smiling blandly—she seemed resolved that her own unruffled composure

should keep pace with the other's excitement—"that my opinions were worthy of such extensive circulation as it appears they have obtained. Well, Miss Fletcher, as my time is rather valuable to me just now, and you were kept waiting at the commencement, I will not detain you by any further preaching, or by a lengthened answer to what you call your earnest appeal. I will merely say that, although I do disapprove of second marriages in a general way, I disapprove a very great deal more of young women, who ought to know better, rebelling against their parents, and setting them at open defiance. If my daughter becomes your father's wife, she will do her duty by you all; but you must excuse me if I add that, in such a case, she will be the one to be pitied, and not you and your sister. —Miss Fletcher, I have the honour to wish you good afternoon. My servant shall attend you to your carriage."

And rising, with much quiet ease and dignity, from her chair, Mrs. Bellew walked to the bell and rang it sharply. Then, turning, she bowed courteously and with a still smiling face to her pale, dumb guest, who was left (to venture upon a literal translation of a really untranslatable French idiom) "planted there."

CHAPTER IX.

MARRIED.


WHATEVER secret triumph Mrs. Bellew may have felt in the consciousness that she had been something more than a match for the imperious Miss Elizabeth, she contented herself with telling Margaret enough about the interview to explain why she advised the latter still to prolong her stay in town. "For there can be no doubt," wrote the mother, "that this girl is bitterly resenting the setting down she got from me, and that it will be her delight to heap upon you every mortification and insult she can devise when once you are in the neighbourhood

again. People talk far too much about you and your affairs as it is—it would have been so with regard to any woman who was going to marry David Fletcher—and when they discover how obnoxious the marriage is to his children, their tongues will wag faster still; therefore, I repeat, stay where you are, and enjoy yourself as long as you can. Your work is progressing charmingly, and there will be only the dressmaking and millinery to see to when you come. Be sure you choose *soft* silks, even if they look less rich than the stiff ones, and in buying velvet, remember that a tolerably high price is cheapest in the end. Mr. Fletcher looked very ill in church on Sunday, and he came in alone, his daughters having preceded him. I don't believe he has been seen out of doors with either of them, except on the day he brought the youngest to Abbotsmead, since their return from Paris. Why doesn't he compel Amy to be his companion, and

send that proud minx back to her aunt in London? I never knew a man, nor a woman either, for that matter, who had such an aptitude as this David Fletcher has for lying quietly down and letting people trample on him. Humility is all very well, but this goes beyond humility, and in my judgment merits a less easily spelt name; but I suppose, by-and-by, when you take him in hand, you will effect a revolution in many things. There's room enough for improvement up at the Hall, goodness knows! and as you are a wise woman, I presume you would not have embarked on this enterprise had you not been sure of your own fitness for it, and convinced that you possessed all the qualifications necessary for success."

Poor Margaret read her mother's letter, of which the above is only a brief extract, with many mingled emotions. She was grateful for the advice it gave her concerning

her stay in London, as this proved beyond question the writer's disinterestedness, and real anxiety for her daughter's peace and comfort ; but all the observations about David pained and worried her, and the winding up remarks, in reference to the magnitude of the task she had undertaken, touched a very sensitive chord in her soul, and one that was too apt to give back wailing rather than jubilant music. Alas ! she was by no means sure of her own fitness to become David Fletcher's wife, and the mother of those ill-trained girls. Often, in talking it over with her thoroughly sympathizing friend, she acknowledged that she was haunted by misgivings and apprehensions of all kinds, and that nothing but the solemn conviction that David could not do without her now, gave her courage to hold to her engagement, for though, she said, her own affection for him had suffered no loss, had even acquired strength in the



growing feeling of his utter need of her, still, she could have made a sacrifice of this had it stood alone. The responsibilities of her position were in fact weighing upon her too heavily, and there were seasons when natural weakness and fearfulness prevailed over all else, and made her wish, with a mournful intensity (mournful because of its uselessness), that the spring day when she had sat with David Fletcher under the cedar tree, and won for ever his too susceptible heart, could be blotted out from the records of time.

Mrs. Bellew's letter brought about such a season as this, but it brought also the strong impression to Margaret's mind that she was not acting quite fairly by poor David in staying so long away from him. Her mother had said he looked ill ; a letter she received from himself, a few days later, satisfied her that he must be far from well, and that, at any rate, he was thoroughly out of spirits,

and getting no comfort or sympathy from his daughters. He did not even hint that he wanted or expected Margaret to come home, but every word he wrote unmistakably proclaimed the fact of his yearning for her; and uniting this with what Mrs. Bellew had communicated, the recipient of the two letters decided that she ought, by all means, to go, that it would be selfish, now that her health was amended and her commissions finished, to remain in London for her own pleasure only. Of course her friends thought differently, and urged her, by every argument they could invent, to prolong her visit; but Margaret was not a woman to swerve from any purpose which she had made up her mind to be a right one. She did not even announce her sudden resolve to either of her correspondents at Ditchley, but walked quietly into the dining-room at Abbotsmead one evening, just as Mrs. Bellew was sitting down to her lonely tea, and wonder-

ing (as this strange woman sometimes did, in a speculative way) whether her daughter's temporary absence was really preparing her for the life-long solitude to which that daughter's marriage would condemn her.

That she was glad at heart to see her now, there could be no shadow of doubt; though she never said so, but said, instead, that Margaret had startled her out of her wits, and that her nerves would not recover the shock for a day or two. Nevertheless, she was very kind and very cheerful, complimented her daughter on her improved looks, promised to show her all the finished garments by-and-by; and, to crown the whole, as Margaret was too warm and tired from her journey to relish substantial food, ordered Priscilla to bring forth a certain bottle of preserved peaches, which had been kept till now, as something sacred, on the very highest shelf of her private store closet.

After tea, they had a great deal to talk

about, and Margaret had to go into raptures over every separate piece of work that was spread before her admiring eyes; and then there was the garden to be visited, and all the new flowers that had bloomed to be caressed and rejoiced over; and in one way and another the ladies got over this first evening of their re-union delightfully, scarcely broaching the subject of the approaching marriage or of poor David himself, though Margaret had confessed, in the beginning, that it was mainly for his sake that she had curtailed her London visit.

The next morning she wrote to tell him of her return, and in less than an hour after he had received the letter he was at Abbotsmead, almost too full of gratitude, and happiness, and devotedness, to be able to express these emotions like a sane man, or to forbear demonstrations that would have startled his calm and very gentle Margaret.

But his gladness was too real a thing for

her to avoid sympathizing heartily with it, and rejoicing that she had yielded to her first impulse to come home and comfort him. He told her how the fear of her having grown indifferent had been the secret source of nearly all his late wretchedness, the supremely bitter drop in the cup of bitterness his unloving children mingled for him and obliged him to drink. And when Margaret, laughing at and scolding him by turns, asked *when* he would learn to have perfect confidence in her affection, he only replied, with a pathetic humility in his voice, and clasping tight the hands she held out to him---“You must forgive me my doubts, my dearest. This love of yours is so ineffably sweet and precious a thing, that when I lose sight of you I cannot help suspecting its reality. You must never go far from me again, Margaret, my life is bound up in yours; it would soon cease to exist separately.”

Then he told her how cold and hard and gloomy Elizabeth continued to be, how she secluded herself in her own room or drove alone to the cemetery, how rarely she addressed a kind or gracious word to him, even when they met unavoidably at meals, and how Amy, afraid, he supposed, of offending her sister, kept out of his way as much as possible, but looked always moped and dull and listless. He would get another governess for this poor child, he said, but that Margaret would so soon be at the head of his household now, and set them all to rights. Whereupon Margaret, feeling excessively dubious on this last point, begged him not to be too sanguine as to her ability, and earnestly advised him, if the governess scheme were delayed, to insist on Amy's taking up some study or employment that would interest her, and at the same time remove her, in some degree, from her sister's pernicious influence. Rhoda had mentioned

that her cousin wanted to be useful in the parish, as her late mother had been. Why could not David speak to the Rector, or some of the present ruling ladies in Ditchley? They would all be glad to take a Miss Fletcher by the hand, and Amy would gain, in every way, by having regular work that must be attended to.

"It is an admirable idea, my love," responded David, who would no doubt have said and thought the same had Margaret suggested expediting Amy on a voyage to the moon; "and I will call on Mr. Spenser as I go home to-day. The poor man owes me a huge grudge, it is true, but he is a clergyman, and ought to forgive more easily than other folk. By-the-by, I am afraid, Margaret, we can scarcely ask him to marry us, and we shall have to be content with the solemn slowness, and the funereal aspect of the Reverend Caleb Jones."

"It is not September yet," said Margaret,

“and there may be found means, between now and then, for avoiding either alternative—but you have stayed long enough for to-day, Mr. Fletcher,” she added, with that tender smile of lip and eyes which was so very sweet to David, “and you had better go now and make your call upon the Rector. You can come again at the end of the week, and tell me what has been done for Amy; but you must not come before, nor very often afterwards. My mother has the first claim upon my society till she loses me altogether.”

And though David quite failed to see the force of this reasoning, he had to submit to the decree. Margaret allowed him to call twice a week regularly, but unless Mrs. Bellew volunteered to have him in the room where she happened to be, on any of these occasions, he was not encouraged to prolong his visit above half-an-hour. Of course he felt it very hard, and sometimes murmured


a good deal, but Margaret knew how to silence and soothe her discontented lover, though possibly he was too much of a man ever to acknowledge the justice of the mother having *her* day, to the detriment of the future husband.

So it was, however, and Mrs. Bellew, entirely approving her daughter's conduct, and appreciating its motives, evinced more open affection for Margaret than she had ever done before, and showed a consideration for her, in all their intercourse, which would have surprised anybody who had only known this ordinarily cold and unbending woman superficially.

Very rapidly the days and weeks now sped away. It had been a summer of unusual splendour, and Abbotsmead, with its large cool rooms, its shady garden, its pleasant orchard, and its abundant supply of the richest fruit and the sweetest flowers, had grown into the affections of its two home-

loving occupants, as no other place they had lived in had ever grown before.

As September approached, there is no denying the fact that Margaret was conscious at odd times, of a strange sadness, a foreboding weight upon her spirits, that she tried in vain to shake off or ignore. Nothing of a special nature had occurred to disturb or worry her since her return from London. David had revived miraculously under her soothing and cheering influence—with Elizabeth she had never come into immediate contact again. Her advice concerning Amy had been adopted, and had turned out well, Mr. Spenser taking the poor child, who only wanted to be useful, under his own pastoral wing, and even, it was said, working more himself in the parish than he had ever yet done, that he might teach Amy Fletcher how to work. All this was satisfactory, and gave Margaret a certain degree of pleasure because it pleased David. Once or twice, too,



she had met Amy in Ditchley, and on these occasions the latter, though invariably looking a little frightened, as if she expected Elizabeth to pounce upon them from some neighbouring shop, or round some treacherous corner, had always been very friendly and nice in her manner, conveying the idea that in time she might grow into a fairly docile and lovable little step-daughter, if the elder sister would desist from interference, and content herself with being rebellious and disagreeable in her own person.

But, in spite of all this, to which must be added Mrs. Bellew's constant kindness to her daughter, the perfect smoothness of their home life, and the absence of all external vexations of every description, Margaret was far less happy than she ought to have been, considering she was going to marry a man she loved, and by whom she was even unreasonably adored, that her position would

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be a distinguished one, and that she had, at least, a good fund of physical health and strength to begin upon, wherewith to meet and fight the giants, whose presence in her new pathway constituted its only drawback.

But ah, those giants! In the distance, how strong and invincible they looked; no weakness in the joints of their armour; no feebleness or self-mistrust in those dauntless aspects; simply defiance to the death to the frail, helpless little woman who was presumptuous enough to venture into their sacred dominion.

Elizabeth Fletcher was, of course, a very big giant, and one that Margaret doubted her own ability to fight successfully; but there were others that alarmed the wife elect quite as much, and amongst them—though she only confided this to her inmost heart—was David's weakness of nature and tendency to morbid depression and indolence. He was no longer a very young man, and the


habits of a lifetime must be hard to overcome ; and yet if she failed to fight victoriously with these, Margaret knew that she should not make him really happy, and that the great end she proposed to herself, in becoming his wife, would not be accomplished.

It was perhaps a far-fetched notion that she held, but she did hold it very strongly—that in marrying a man like David Fletcher, a man whose nature, however tender and noble, was feebler than her own, she was taking upon herself the burden of another human soul, and assuming, in fact, the solemnly responsible office of her husband's keeper. What if she failed, after all, to discharge her trust, or discharged it in an imperfect manner ? What would her love, her utmost devotion, avail him in the end, if it had poured only sweetness and no strength into the life she wanted to bless indeed !

Haunted by such thoughts and fears as these, and many others growing out of them,

poor Margaret, having completed all the work that her fingers had to do, and in the doing of which her mind and brain were kept from more serious preoccupation, watched the coming on of the golden autumn, the freshening of the air, the shortening of the days, the purpling and reddening of the trees, with anything but jubilant feelings; but she carried her burden in secret, never giving, either to her mother or David, a single hint that she was otherwise than glad and light of heart, and in their presence usually managing to appear so.

Quite at the last, when Mrs. Bellew was talking one day with a little of her old querulousness about the wedding, and vexing herself with the idea of the scandal the absence of the bridegroom's daughters would excite, as well as of the comments that would be made on the Rector's declining to perform the ceremony, Margaret said that, if her mother and Mr. Fletcher both ap-



proved, she should greatly prefer being married from her friend's house in London. Mrs. Dormer had proposed this while she was there, and had begged Margaret, if she could contrive it, to give Mrs. Bellew a cordial invitation to come up a week before the wedding was to take place, with her daughter.

"I only waited to ascertain your feelings on the subject," added the latter. "My own would be strongly opposed to any ceremony at Ditchley; and I am sure Mr. Fletcher will equally rejoice at getting out of that. But you will come with me, mamma, will you not?"

Mrs. Bellew shook her head in a very decided manner.

"My dear Margaret," she said, and her voice was not quite so steady as she would probably have desired it to be, "you must not ask this of me. You know I *never* leave my home, and it would be a real trial to me

to have to go to the house of a stranger, which Mr. Dormer of course is; but quite apart from these personal objections, I like the thought of the marriage itself, and, to be frank with you, I like David Fletcher, too little, to have any wish to be present at the ceremony. It would only be a grievous ordeal to me, and my congratulations, however I might try to prevent it, would sound like condolences. Go up to your friend, my dear. She is attached to you, and will, at all events, act as a married sister on the occasion. As for me, I will sit at home, and picture all that is going on, waiting, with such patience as necessity gives, till my daughter, Mrs. Fletcher of the Hall, returns, and takes up her dwelling, not with, but near, her lonely mother again."

A speech that did not, certainly, tend to make the daughter feel especially lively or happy; but the time for action and busy

doing was fast coming now, and all sentiment and emotion had to be ordered into the background, till a more convenient season should arrive for their indulgence.

David was charmed and relieved beyond measure at the plan of having the wedding in London. He had not been there to stay for some years, and he thought he might for once enjoy the excitement and the bustle, and the variety of a great city. Perhaps, too, he did not dislike the thought of getting away from his home and his eldest daughter, rather sooner than he had reckoned on doing. Anyhow, he wrote to his lawyer to secure him apartments at the nearest hotel to Mr. Dormer's house, and, wishing to choose his bride's wedding presents himself, he went up some days before Margaret could decide on leaving her mother.

Elizabeth expressed neither surprise nor interest when her father told her of his intended absence. She declined, in the

most positive tones, inviting her aunt, Mrs. Meredith, to come to the Hall while he was away. She was quite capable, she said, of taking care of herself and Amy for any length of time. There was no fear of *her* doing anything to outrage the proprieties of life, or to give the world an excuse for blaming her.

So David went off with the echo of his child's unloving voice ringing sadly enough in his ears, but with the hope of a new love and a new life making such music in his heart, that the old discord was almost forgotten.

It was quite forgotten when, some ten days later, Margaret Bellew stood beside him at the altar, and, in a sweet, unfaltering voice, promised to love and cleave to him alone, till death should them part.

Poor David ! He had got his cup of joy assured to him at last, and raising it to his eager lips he prayed that in its sur-

passing sweetness he might remember no more the wormwood and the gall of his days of darkness, and that all his future life might be one long anthem of praise for the blessing his beseeching hands had at length obtained.

And what was Margaret's prayer in the solemn hour which had made her David Fletcher's wife?

Only for strength to do her life's work, and for firmness, courage, and clearness of vision, to keep that sacred work ever in view.

CHAPTER X.

THE HONEYMOON.

THEY went to one of the remotest, least frequented, but, at the same time, most picturesque spots in North Wales for the few weeks they had decided on taking wholly for themselves, before entering upon that domestic life which both knew was not likely to be all roses.

It is a general opinion that brides and bridegrooms, irrespective of age or their fondness for each other, find what is called the honeymoon a rather trying period. If they are young and gay, the quiet and the solitude soon pall upon them and depress

their spirits ; if they are middle-aged and sober, they miss their ordinary occupations, are not romantic enough to exist upon love-making and fine scenery, and usually end (though perhaps they are shocked that it should be so) in wishing, fifty times a day, that they were quietly settled at home, and that such egregious mistakes as honeymoons had never been invented.

But if this is indeed the rule as regards newly married couples in general, Mr. and Mrs. David Fletcher must be cited as forming a remarkable exception to it. They had, it is true, many things in their favour. The weather was glorious, the scenery magnificent, and full of novelty to them both ; they had secured charming apartments looking upon one of the fairest and bluest of Cambrian lakes ; Margaret was an enthusiastic, and by no means a contemptible, artist, and David never wearied of reading aloud. He also liked fishing, which sport was to be had

in perfection in some of the adjacent rivers running up for miles amongst the high purple mountains surrounding their temporary home ; and as Margaret liked equally well the fish he caught, he was encouraged frequently to pursue this pastime for a whole day together, while she walked or sat with her sketch book beside him, and made all the hours golden for the man whose supreme happiness it was that he called her wife.

With so many elements of rational and innocent enjoyment spread lavishly around them, and with the delightful consciousness that each was adding to the contentment of the other, it would have been strange had these two not enjoyed themselves, and given care concerning the future to the winds, during those few sunny and tranquil weeks amongst the Welsh hills and valleys. In the very beginning Margaret had been sometimes half amused and half puzzled in

noticing that David kept a vigilant watch upon every word she spoke, every movement she made, and above all, upon every caress she either voluntarily, or at his humble petition, bestowed upon him. At last she asked him boldly what it meant, whether he was afraid he had married a snow woman, who would suddenly, one fine day, melt away before his astonished eyes, or in his vainly encircling arms.

“No, not quite that,” he replied, laughing because she was laughing, but showing plainly that the matter had been a very serious one to him. “I knew *you* would remain Margaret, whatever happened, and do your duty faithfully by me to the last; but the truth is I have been haunted by a deadly fear, born of my old experience, that your love might go from me, go without your will, and leave us both miserable for ever. I am beginning to lose this dread now—I am indeed, Margaret—to trust my dear

wife, and to be perfectly happy and at rest."


"Time you were!" said Margaret, who had opened her eyes very wide while her husband was giving his explanation, and who continued when he was silent to gaze half tenderly, half reproachfully into his sensitive face. "I am overwhelmed with shame for you, Mr. Fletcher, and I must most earnestly and solemnly request that if ever I have to blush for my husband again, it may be for a less heinous offence than that of mistrusting a good wife, who has been foolish enough to make him the gift of her whole heart."

Upon this David took comfort, ceased to watch his wife, and was as happy as a man may well be, who after shivering in the cold for long years, finds himself suddenly in a place of warm sunbeams, and is assured that he will be permitted to remain there till his life's end.

But, though I have said that Margaret was very happy too—how could a woman of her essentially tender nature avoid feeling an ineffable contentment in witnessing the joy and peace her love had conferred?—it must not be supposed that she succeeded in abstracting herself so wholly from all the interests that lay beyond these sheltering mountains, as the impassioned companion of her retirement. She wrote frequently to her mother, to Mrs. Dormer and to Rhoda, and received long letters from them. She simplified many of her sketches from nature, with special reference to Amy, who might be induced to copy them by-and-by; and finally, she was constantly begging David to write to Elizabeth to announce his marriage, and mention when they might be expected to arrive at home.

Now David Fletcher had always hated letter writing with a downright, honest hatred. He was not clever at it; he had no

organ of language, and his hand had an inconvenient habit of shaking whenever he took up a pen. Besides all this, he was naturally indolent, and just now he did not want to be reminded of his troublesome daughters in any way. Elizabeth, he said, had manifested such utter indifference when he told her he was going from home, had bade him good-bye with such freezing coldness, had never asked him to write, or suggested writing to him, that he did not see why he should put himself out now by hurrying to tell her of his marriage. She did not read the newspapers, she did not go about making calls, she never encouraged the gossip of servants; therefore, even when the news reached Ditchley, it would not be likely to extend to her. Of course he *must* write soon; he would certainly do it in a day or two. His dear Margaret was so generous and so good, in being anxious that he should not further offend his ungrateful



girls; but she need not worry herself; the letter should be despatched in due time. They were going out fishing and sketching this morning. Perhaps to-morrow would be rainy, and then he would stay at home and write.

But the morrow was not rainy, nor the day after, and David would not hear of giving up a single hour of enjoyment, in the bright September sunshine, with his Margaret for a companion, for all the daughters in the world. In vain his patient wife argued the matter, assured him he was acting foolishly, hinted even that he was selfish and unlike himself, that Elizabeth would now have a just cause for anger and offence, that poor Amy, who had only sinned negatively, was being badly treated as well as her sister—David listened to it all with a half weary smile, kissed his mistress, and declared he was only delaying his task till the first wet day.

In the end, Margaret feigned to be really displeased, said she should never mention the subject to him again, sketched in silence beside him during the whole of that morning; and then he went home and wrote his letter.

She had gained her point, which, after all, should have been his point more than hers; but the conflict had been vexatious to her, and it was some little time before she could enter anew into the full enjoyment of their walks and drives and quiet evening readings.

As for David, he forgot the whole affair until, nearly a week after his letter had been dispatched, he received, one morning, the following agreeable reply from his eldest daughter.

“Having delayed so long the communication of the *very pleasant news* which forms the subject of your letter from Wales, I almost wonder that you thought it worth while to mention it to your children until

you brought home the lady you say you have made your wife, and issued your commands that they, and your entire household, should be subject to this new mistress. As it happens, we had the pain and humiliation of hearing, first, through the gossip of our own servants, that Mr. Fletcher was married to Miss Bellew, and that they were 'gone off, pleasuring,' to some place at the world's end! Of course I was unable either to confirm or contradict the degrading statement—for it is degrading to us, to you, and to everybody concerned in the matter. Do you look for congratulations from Amy and myself? If so, I am sorry, because we are too honest, and too true and loyal to our dead mother's memory, to offer them. I can only repeat what I said to you and that lady some months ago in the boudoir, namely, that I will never, never call any woman mother, nor acknowledge her right to sit in *my* mother's vacant place. As your wife, of

course, this person you have married will be received here; for I recognize the fact that so long as I accept the shelter of your roof, I pledge myself to avoid any open hostility towards you and your friends, *whatever my private feelings, as regards these last, may be!* I conclude that you will send all your orders to your housekeeper, when you have fixed the day of your return. She will doubtless be zealous, as is the custom of all paid servants, to give satisfaction to her new mistress. I really don't think there is anything else to be said. Amy is quite well, and continues a devotee to her parish labours. Mr. Spenser is good enough to take a warm and fatherly interest in her—doubtless for poor mamma's sake. We both unite in love to yourself.

“Your dutiful daughter,

“ELIZABETH.”

David Fletcher ought to have been prepared for some such letter as he had now received from his dutiful daughter Elizabeth.

He knew her character tolerably well by this time, and his wife had warned him often enough that the young lady's temper would not be improved by his long delay in imparting to her the news of his marriage.

But David had so perseveringly thrust back all thoughts of his daughters, all thoughts, indeed, that were unwelcome to him in any way, since he had gained the desire of his heart, that the present epistle, containing the insolent expression of Elizabeth's sentiments, came upon him almost as a new revelation, and one against which his whole nature stood up in angry and determined protest.

Crushing the offensive letter in his hand, after he had read it once through, and without even looking at his wife, who was seated opposite to him, he buried his head between his two arms on the table, and uttered an exclamation of passionate indignation that was almost a groan.

Margaret let him be for a minute or two, and then, finding that neither his attitude nor his demonstrations seemed to be bringing him relief, she went round very noiselessly to his side, and encircled the bowed neck with her tender arm.

"Is there any reason, David?" she asked very gently, "why we should not share this trouble together? Has Elizabeth (for I conclude it is from her you have heard) called me such terrible names that you dare not show me her letter? You need not be afraid. I never expected much mercy at her hands. Don't you believe that I counted the cost of my tower before I began to build it?"

Then David lifted his head, and revealed a countenance white with emotion, which, in this case, was chiefly anger.

"My darling," he said, grasping the caressing hands that had won him from his gloomy reverie, and squeezing them so

tightly that Margaret wished heartily she had forgotten to put on her rings that morning, "my darling, this mad rebellious girl of mine is not worth a second thought. I am a fool to mind anything she says, or leaves unsaid. Here is her cruel letter if you care to read it, only burn it afterwards, that I may never have the misfortune of even seeing the outside of it again. A very miserable, pitiable King Lear, I should be, if I had not you, my sweet good wife, to support and comfort me!"

Margaret took the crumpled letter from her husband, quietly and patiently smoothed it out, and then read it to the end very carefully—David watching her all the time with his brows knit in apparently perplexed and anxious meditation. Once he noticed that the face of the reader flushed hotly for a minute, and he could guess the words she had arrived at; but, after this, Margaret betrayed no emotion whatever, till her task

was finished, when, tearing the letter across and consigning it to the fire (both husband and wife were agreed in liking a little artificial heat even in September), she said calmly—

“It is rather milder, upon the whole, than I anticipated, though Miss Elizabeth is evidently fond of strong expressions when she thinks occasion calls for them. But I am not killed, you see, David, in spite of the deadliness of the arrows aimed at me. On the contrary, I feel remarkably strong and well this morning, and quite ready, if you will take me, to walk up the valley, and finish the sketch of the ivy bridge I began yesterday.”

Whether David quite believed his wife's brave assertion may be doubted, but anyhow, what she failed, if she did indeed fail, to feel for herself, he, as her husband and her very devoted lover, felt for her. Nor could he either shake off or conceal the rude

shock his daughter's letter had given him. The same principle which had made it easy for this impulsive and impressionable man to forget all home shadows so long as they were not thrust obtrusively across the sunny path on which he had entered when he married a wife, made it difficult, if not impossible, for him to ignore, or lightly regard, these same shadows when they did actually come again in his way. They brought with them all the bitter memories of the past; they took all the buoyancy and brightness out of the present; they even robbed his Margaret's affection of some of its sweetness, and her society of its charm, because every time he looked at her, every time her gentle, loving words sounded in his ear, he could not help remembering the life that was probably before her, the cruel payment she would get for all she had given, and was giving daily and hourly, to him.

For the whole of that day on which Elizabeth's letter had been received, David Fletcher remained buried in the profoundest depression. He would not go out, and he would not let his wife stay at home with him. Margaret had wished and begged to do so, but as he was obstinate (urging that sick or sorrowful people were better alone) she forebore to argue the point, and went up the valley to finish her sketch unaccompanied. At dinner time he could not eat, and in the afternoon he sat by the window that looked on the beautiful lake, doing nothing, and only responding in monosyllables to all that his wife said to him. In the evening, he roused a very little, entreated Margaret to forgive him for his churlishness, declared that when the black fit came upon him he was powerless as an infant in its clutches; and, finally, invited her to a moonlight walk around the lake, exhorting her to talk to

him now, and help to drive his demon away.

Margaret did her best—had she not, with open eyes, devoted her life and all her energies to the task of making this man happy?—but it had not been a cheerful day for her, though David knew nothing of the sad thoughts that had been painted in, with every stroke of her brush, amongst the rugged stonework of the ivy bridge that morning, nor of the tears that had, more than once, fallen unawares upon her picture, threatening to mar the beauty and delicacy of its execution.

She did her best, as I have said, to cheer and gladden him—knowing, as women who are wives come to know very soon, that, to be a true help-meet for the man, she must now and always put her individual cares and sorrows into the back-ground.

They had only one week to remain in Wales after this, and though David recovered

his spirits to some extent, they both felt as if a chill blast had suddenly swept over all their bright and smiling landscape, reminding them too roughly of the coming winter, to enable them to enjoy, with quite the same delicious abandonment, the remnant of their glowing summer.

In the actual world, the trees had grown thin and sere, the sun was fast losing its warmth, and northern winds were beginning to sweep stormily through the melancholy land, when the newly-married pair bade a most reluctant farewell to their peaceful home amongst the mountains, and turned their steps towards Ditchley—and Elizabeth!

CHAPTER XI.

THE STEP-DAUGHTERS.

RAIN, rain, rain—nothing but rain ; a blinding, pitiless, uncompromising downfall, that evidently knew what it was about, and meant doing it. This had been going on from the earliest dawn of the cold October day on which Mr. Fletcher and his new wife were expected at Ditchley. It was going on still with obstinate persistency, when, at about five o'clock, Elizabeth Fletcher walked listlessly into the drawing-room at the Hall, and found Amy already established before a huge fire, with a book and a pet dog in her lap, and her toilette, which was not apt to

be quite a pattern of neatness, rather more carefully attended to than usual.

For a minute or two the elder sister contented herself with standing on the opposite side of the fire-place and looking down gloomily upon the younger; but as Amy took no heed of this (she was probably too familiar with Elizabeth's strange ways to be much affected by them), the last comer said presently—

“You really suggest a perfect picture of comfort and complacency, Amy. One would think you were anticipating the arrival of this new Mrs. Fletcher, with boundless satisfaction. I don't believe you regard it as a serious trial anyhow, whereas to me it is worse than being put upon the rack. The woman's very name is hateful, odious, loathsome to me! *I* have not made myself smart to receive her, you see.”


“I see you have not,” replied Amy, looking up at her queenly sister with a half

regretful expression in her own placid face ;
“and I don’t know that you can justly call *me* particularly smart. I am simply a little tidier than usual. I thought papa would like and expect me to pay some sort of respect to his new wife. I wish you would not set yourself so completely against her, Elizabeth. Of course I, too, would rather papa had not married again, but I cannot understand why you should hate this lady he happens to have chosen. Mr. Spenser says she is a very superior, charming person, indeed ; and I really like the little I have seen of her.”

Now this was a very long and a very courageous speech for the quiet, timid Amy to make to her imperious sister, and one of which she would have been utterly incapable a few weeks ago, before she had been brought under the influence of the fatherly rector. Elizabeth thoroughly comprehended the matter, and had supreme contempt for the

facile nature which could be so easily moulded and bent by any hand possessed of ordinary strength and skill.


“What do I care for the opinion of your Mr. Spenser?” was the almost fierce answer. “There is a report that he was in love with the woman himself, but of course the Hall is a finer place than the Rectory, and Mr. Fletcher, with all his drawbacks, a great catch for a person with no social status, and no longer very young.—Amy,” she continued, beginning to pace excitedly up and down in front of the fire, and within her sister’s hearing, “I wish you were older and a little wiser, that I might talk to you unreservedly, as an equal, and tell you how very, very miserable I am. I don’t believe there exists a more wretched being on the face of the earth, and what I am fearing is that the arrival of this woman, and the scenes that will inevitably ensue between me and our father, will drive me to do something des-



perate. My whole nature seems working up towards such a climax. I cannot help it. I was born with stormy feelings. I am sometimes literally afraid of myself. The agony of mind I am in to-night, in the hourly anticipation of having to receive Mrs. Fletcher, and be decently civil to her, would be simply incredible to a cool, phlegmatic temperament like yours. I daresay you are freezing, or would be if you were not roasting over that preposterous fire; now I give you my word, my blood is boiling—I am in a perfect fever—the heat of this room (I suppose Mrs. Barrington had orders to convert the Hall into a furnace against their arrival), is absolutely suffocating me. If they don't come in a few minutes I shall go back to the boudoir and stay there. Oh how very, very miserable I am!"

"I am so sorry," said Amy, not unsympathetically, for she was a kind little soul, and had inherited much of her father's soft-

ness of nature. "You have looked unhappy, I think, ever since we left Paris. The Rector asked me one day whether there was anything particular the matter with you, but of course I did not know, and therefore I could not tell him. An idea has just struck me, Elizabeth," added this very simple child, as her companion kept walking to and fro, biting her lips, and manifesting various other signs of really painful excitement. "If you are miserable because Mrs. Fletcher is coming to live here, and, of course, it is worse for you than for me, as she will put you into a lower place in the establishment, and mine has never been anything *but* a low one; but if, I say, you are miserable because of this, why can you not go and stay with Aunt Meredith? She is not rich, and what you could contribute towards the housekeeping would make her very glad to have you; and there is Rhoda, whom I am sure you would get to like in time; and though I



should miss you at home, I should not mind myself if you were happier and more contented. I wonder you never thought of this plan, Elizabeth," concluded poor little Amy, in the utmost confidence of having made quite a brilliant hit; "for, don't you agree with me that it is a very capital one?"

Elizabeth had paused in her restless and uncomfortable wanderings, and was standing still now, within a few paces of Amy's chair, gazing down half dreamily, half superciliously upon its innocent occupant.

"I should think," she said at last, with a bitter and unpleasant smile curling the lips she had been treating so cruelly, "that you must be King Solomon's own daughter, to have been inspired with such a felicitous suggestion." Then, approaching rather nearer, and abruptly discarding her sarcastic look and tone, this strange woman-girl continued:—"Amy, you are young, younger in mind than even in years, but I am going to


tell you something which, perhaps, you ought to know, in case that I—well, in the always possible event ” (with a sudden flush) “ of my not being at hand to warn you, should warning be required. It is this—and it nearly chokes me to have to say it—I discovered while we were in Paris, quite at the last, that Aunt Meredith can be less circumspect and prudent in her conduct than I should have deemed it possible for a sister of our dear and most virtuous mother to be. I need not go into particulars. Suffice it, that when I had the misfortune to see what I did see, I reproached her warmly, and perhaps intemperately, and we had one desperate quarrel. Herbert was coming and going then, and he took part with me against his mother. It was a case, Amy, in which any son or daughter would have been justified in so doing. He assured me, afterwards, that the necessity had been heart-breaking to him, the greatest trial he had ever known ; and

judging by my own feelings, I could well believe him. But, to go on about Aunt Meredith.—To my amazement, she did not appear to retain the least anger towards me, in spite of all my hard speeches, at the time of our quarrel, and studied coldness when it was over; only when I said I should return at once with you to England, she declared she would come too, and proposed the scheme, which I never liked, of bringing us herself to Ditchley. For reasons of my own, I have not given a hint to our father of anything of this. I believe Aunt Meredith was tolerably sure I should keep it from *him*; but I could never be on the old affectionate terms with her again; and, as you can see now, I could never, under any possible circumstances, go to live or even to stay with her. This, Amy, has been one of my late troubles, and it is not a slight one, I assure you. I would not have laid the burden of it on you, my dear, but for your

present unhappy suggestion, and the thought that, in the future, your ignorance of it might involve you in danger. Whatever happens, Amy, you must promise me, now, never to visit Aunt Meredith, or to invite her here. Papa hates her, so there is no fear from him; but you are weak and yielding, and she is a clever, subtle woman of the world. Will you give me the promise I have asked?"

Elizabeth had told her story so rapidly and so excitedly, and her manner, at the winding up, had been so strange and solemn, that poor little Amy was half frightened and wholly bewildered. She sat very erect in her lounging chair, however, when her sister came to a pause, and, meeting frankly the large glittering eyes looking searchingly into her own, she said, with some unwonted animation—

"Of course, I will promise what you require, Elizabeth. I should not wish to stay



with aunt if she is not a person to be esteemed; but how wonderful it appears to me! I mean all that you have been telling me—and Rhoda is such a *very* good girl that you would think she must have had the most admirable mother. But don't be angry, Elizabeth, if I ask you one question. What do you mean about your not being at hand to warn me in the future? If you cannot go to Aunt Meredith's, surely you must stay here. We have no other near relations, nor any friends, that I am aware of."

"What a child you are, Amy!" exclaimed the elder sister, with a flushed and irritated face, as she began her perambulations again. "I only spoke of remote contingencies, not of anything I could foresee was going to happen. People die occasionally, don't they, even as young as we are, and I am sure I don't know what I have to live for——"

"And people marry occasionally, too, Eliza-

beth," interrupted Amy, with another inspiration, or possibly with the laudable view of brightening her sister's sombre thoughts—"only there is nobody at Ditchley half good enough for you, and indeed, now I come to remember, there are no unmarried men, except Mr. Spenser, at all. I suppose you would consider him too old?"

Elizabeth was very nearly betrayed into a laugh, though it could only have been a spasmodic one, by Amy's quaint remarks—"Old or young," she said, "the Rector of Ditchley would certainly not suit me for a husband. You had better keep him for yourself, Amy. He is well-born, fairly rich, I imagine, and would take good care of a simple little girl like you. For my part, if—if it were not impossible for me to like the man himself, I should greatly prefer playing first fiddle at the Rectory, as Mrs. Spenser, to playing second fiddle at the Hall, as the step-daughter of the ex-Miss Bellew."

"Should you *really*?" exclaimed Amy, looking up in genuine admiration and reverence at her beautiful sister, for whose condescension in talking to her as an equal it is to be presumed she was duly grateful—"then, I wonder why you say it would be impossible for you to like the man himself. He is excessively kind and nice, when you come to be on familiar terms with him; and I don't suppose he is so *very* old!"

"Old! you foolish girl," reproved Elizabeth; "how you harp upon the Rector's age. He is not old at all, in the sense you mean, not too old to marry a woman of any age he may prefer. My objection to him, for myself, is attributable to a wholly different cause."

Amy sat quite still and silent for a minute or two, but her face had an anxious, considering expression in it, which might have prepared the elder sister, had she noticed it, for what the younger was going to say—

“Elizabeth,” was stammered out at length, with much hesitation, and a large increase of colour, “I hope you won’t be hurt or offended with me, if I tell you what I have just been thinking about, what occurred to me as you declared you could never marry Mr. Spenser. When we were in Paris, you know, and Herbert Meredith used to be so much with us, I fancied, sometimes, that he was trying to pay court to you, that he wanted you to like him—and, oh!”—suddenly clasping her hands tightly together, and speaking with a wholly unwonted energy—“I hope you never will, for besides being your cousin I am sure he is not a kind or a good young man—I think he is even cruel, for I saw him once kick his mother’s toy terrier, with all his might, only because it was frisking a little round his legs—and if you married him he might ill-treat *you* in the end. Dear Elizabeth, I am afraid I have made you angry, but please forgive me. I

was obliged to say what was on my mind."

Elizabeth's face had grown first red and then deadly pale, while Amy was speaking. She listened, however, with no further demonstrations till her sister had done. Then she went up quite close to her, laid one trembling hand on the other's shoulder, and, in a husky, agitated voice, delivered her brief reply—

"Amy, I forgive you! but never venture to broach this subject, or to utter a word against Herbert Meredith again. What I think, or how I feel towards him, matters to nobody except myself. For your comfort, however, my poor timid child, take this assurance, that no husband in the world would ever have a second chance of ill-treating *me*."

Then she slowly walked away from Amy's chair; and neither sister spoke again till, some ten minutes later, the sound of rapidly

approaching wheels warned them that a new subject for excitement, and one that could not so easily be disposed of, was close at hand.

CHAPTER XII.

THE BRIDE'S HOME-COMING.

WITHOUT waiting to ask what Elizabeth meant to do, Amy sprang from her chair, her face still all flushed and agitated from the recent interchange of sentiments with her elder sister, and ran into the hall to be amongst the first to welcome the travellers. She found, as she expected, the servants of the household rapidly assembling close to the front door, all of them being smartly dressed, having smiling countenances, and looking in short, admirably "got up" for the occasion.

Plenty of warmth and brightness within

(on the surface, at any rate), to offer a pleasing contrast to the darkness, and the cold, and the still merciless rain, that the bride and bridegroom were coming from without.

As the hall doors were thrown wide open, on the stopping of the carriage, an icy blast of wind swept dismally through them, nearly knocking down poor Amy, who was running out upon the steps, and catching the breath of fat Mrs. Barrington, the housekeeper—that dignitary remarking later, to her fellow-servants, that, of all things, she disliked the coming home of a newly-married pair in a gale of wind. It was a dreadful omen!

As soon as the travellers had struggled up the steps into the light and warmth of the hall, and Amy had kissed and been kissed by them both, she noticed that, while Mrs. Fletcher was looking very sweet-tempered and amiable, in spite of fatigue, her husband was looking tired too, but anxious,

restless, and a little cross as well. His face had certainly brightened, for a moment, when he first caught sight of Amy, and observed how nicely she received his new wife, making a point of greeting her, with a kind word and an embrace, even before she spoke to or even looked at her father. But Amy was only a child, after all, and the daughter who ought to have been here was absent. Of course, David had foreseen that it would be so, but he resented it just as bitterly as if he had not; and while Margaret was graciously and cheerfully responding to the salutations, and, in one or two cases, to the openly-spoken welcomes, of the servants, the master of the house was frowning ominously, and causing the watchful and timid Amy, who kept beside him now, some very nervous and uncomfortable heart flutterings.

At length she whispered—"Elizabeth is waiting in the drawing-room, papa. I don't think she is quite well, for her spirits

have been *dreadful* lately ; so perhaps it was best she should not come out to the front door. I am sure Mrs. Fletcher will excuse her."

David turned and patted Amy's glowing cheek. His heart was too kind not to appreciate this generous and courageous little effort at peace-making ; but he gave her no answer, only, following his somewhat victimized wife into the group that were swarming about her, he drew her arm within his own, and led her, unresistingly, towards the drawing-room.

As the door opened (and David purposely made a very noisy affair of this simple undertaking) Elizabeth Fletcher moved slowly, and with much dignity, from her position by the fire-place, in the direction of the trio entering the room. Having arrived close to them, she offered her cheek to her father, and two fingers simultaneously to Margaret, saying, in an indifferent tone, as

though addressing the most casual acquaintances—

“I suppose you are both very tired, and will be glad of some dinner. I believe Mrs. Barrington ordered it to be served at six o'clock in the library, that being in her opinion the warmest room. Amy and myself dined early that we might not interfere with you, and we are now going to have our tea in the boudoir. By-the-by, I may as well mention, at once” (she was addressing her father only now), “that I have taken the boudoir, which you are aware was my poor mother's favourite apartment, for my own special retreat, and had my piano and all my things moved there. It is not much out of this large house, and with the exception of my bedroom I claim nothing more. But *pray* be seated, Mrs. Fletcher,” she added, with a sudden and startling assumption of courtesy, which might have owed its birth to the gathering

wrinkles on her father's brow, or the peculiar whiteness of his face, "I am afraid I have been oblivious of good manners in my eagerness to set things straight in the beginning. Excuse me, and allow me to give you a chair."

Margaret, who knew and had known all along exactly how her husband was both looking and feeling, smiled indulgently in reply to Miss Elizabeth's insolent smartness, and thanking her as though she believed the politeness genuine, said she should prefer going to her room at once. She was tired and travel-stained, and soap and warm water were her most pressing needs. Whereupon Elizabeth, taking no further notice of her father, who seemed restraining the expression of his anger by a huge effort—to which in point of fact he was incited by sundry pinches on his arm from Margaret's gentle fingers—called to Amy to come with her to their tea in the

boudoir, made a low obeisance to Mrs. Fletcher, and walked majestically out of the room.


“My poor patient wife, this has been a somewhat dreary home coming for you,” exclaimed David, as he joined Margaret when she had been about ten minutes in her own bedroom (conducted thither by the attentive Mrs. Barrington, who hoped that everything she had done would be found to her new lady’s taste and liking)—“my heart aches for you, my love, even while it is burning with indignation on my own account. But for your warning pinches, Margaret, I should have spoken out, and put Miss Elizabeth in her proper place, I give you my honour.”

Margaret, who was sitting in a low chair before a most inviting fire, looked up into her husband’s grave distressed face, and smiled—

“Come and have a good warm, David,”

she said, "and don't let us imagine things are worse than they are. We *knew*, both of us, what Elizabeth's reception was likely to be, and I am sure dear little Amy's was charming, and sent a pleasant glow throughout me as I stood shivering from our cold drive. As for the servants, they were all quite gushing in their demonstrations, and the housekeeper, who brought me up here, made so many pretty speeches that I was literally overwhelmed. I did not like to ask her, David—but is this nice room the one your late wife occupied?"

"No," replied David, who probably appreciated Margaret's judicious attempt to divert his thoughts from his offending daughter, "but it is the one that has been mine since Mrs. Fletcher's death. I see, however, that Mrs. Barrington has added some new furniture (I gave her *carte blanche* as to this and some other rooms), and brightened its aspect considerably, which I



am glad of, if it really pleases you, my love. Elizabeth had no right to appropriate the boudoir to herself; but perhaps you will not miss it. I shall hope to have you a good deal with me, in my own little den, or the library."

"Of course," said Margaret cheerfully. "Have I not come here to be your companion and friend? A poor figure I should cut sitting alone in a fine boudoir all day, with an embroidery frame before me, a harp in the corner, and a dozen or two magnificently bound books, for show not use, on some inlaid shelves against the wall. This is my idea of a lady's boudoir, David, and I have no ambition to possess such a luxury."

So she chatted to him; so she won him from his gloomy thoughts once more; so she put aside all her own vexations, anxieties, and cares, that she might be a comfort and a help, indeed, to the husband she had

deliberately chosen in her mature womanhood, and whom she really loved with a very tender, pitiful affection.

They dined very cosily together in the warm library, the venerable butler waiting on his new mistress with such manifest alacrity and good-will, that it could not but suggest the idea that the old one had been indifferently esteemed in the household. Margaret supposed that the young ladies would join them in the evening—Amy at any rate—and she had unpacked and brought down all her Welsh sketches for the latter's inspection; but the husband and wife were left undisturbed, and for fear that David should worry over this, Margaret pleaded fatigue and went to bed very early, mentioning that she wished to pay her mother a visit the first thing the next morning.

A very beautiful October day it proved, after the ceaseless rain of the twenty-four hours preceding it. Mrs. Fletcher, who had

been trained, as the reader is aware, to habits of early rising, was the first to enter the breakfast-room. She had not yet engaged a maid of her own, and she had civilly declined, the night before, the services of the young woman who acted in that capacity towards Miss Fletcher and her sister. Mrs. Barrington, appearing in answer to the breakfast-room bell, was shocked to discover that her new lady had dressed herself, and done her own hair; she would have been so proud and so happy to have tried her best with her own hands, if Mrs. Fletcher had only sent for her. But Margaret laughed, in thanking the stately old dame, and said, in her natural way, that she had always been accustomed to dress herself, and she could not see why this should be a more difficult process for a married lady than for a spinster.

Whereupon Mrs. Barrington, being in an unusually sensitive state of mind this morn-

ing, wiped her eyes and decided secretly—that is till she had an opportunity of imparting her feelings down stairs—that there never was a sweeter or a more affable lady than the second Mrs. Fletcher.

Margaret had made the tea and coffee, knowing that her husband would not be long in joining her, and had just sat down with the morning paper before the fire, when Amy came in alone, looking rather less cheerful and at her ease than on the previous evening, but greeting her step-mother affectionately, if a little shyly, and then hastening to explain that Elizabeth having a head ache would take her breakfast in her own room, and had asked her sister to send it up to her at once.

“I hope papa will not be angry,” added Amy, rather anxiously, as she began choosing some delicacies from the table for Elizabeth’s tray, “would you, please —?”

“Would I please ask him *not* to be,”

interrupted Margaret smilingly, as the speaker hesitated, and appeared dubious as to the ground she was treading on. "Is this what you meant, my dear?"

"Well, something like it," acknowledged poor Amy with relief. "I believe I meant to say, would you kindly let him see that *you* do not mind, as then he would probably let it pass, being used, himself, to Elizabeth's ways. It does make everything so miserable when they quarrel," added this little peace-loving girl with a sigh, "and I am sure you will like to do all you can to prevent it."

"Indeed I shall," responded Margaret earnestly, as she moved to Amy's side, and, at her request poured out a cup of strong tea for the invalid, "and if this is only to be accomplished by my appearing indifferent to your sister's behaviour towards myself, I must try all I can to grow hard and cold towards *her*, Amy; but I had hoped that it

would have been different, that I might have won both my husband's daughters to endure me in time."

Margaret's voice faltered a very little here, in spite of herself, and Amy's quick ear detecting it (perhaps it ought to be added, and Elizabeth being at a safe distance) she turned round impulsively, threw her arms about her step-mother's neck, and kissed her warmly.

"I am nobody," she said with quaint humility, "in comparison with Elizabeth, but I am sure it will be very easy for me to grow fond of you, and indeed I mean to be as dutiful and obedient as if you were my real mother. Mr. Spenser thinks I ought to be, and I promised him I would. Besides, I liked you on my own account from the first. You won't be very unhappy about Elizabeth, will you?"

"I will let your liking, my dear Amy, atone for her shrinking from me," said Mar-

garet, returning the embrace with interest, and smiling gratefully through the tears that had come unbidden into her loving eyes —“but that is your father's step in the passage, and we must not initiate him into our little secrets, nor permit him to see that we have been indulging in emotion so very early in the morning. We shall all be the happier for growing thoroughly practical, matter of fact, and useful, in this household. At any rate you and I will try to set the example.”

David did not bluster much about his eldest daughter's absence from the morning meal, when he saw that Margaret made light of it, and was on such pleasant, friendly terms with Amy. He was in good spirits himself, and seemed to derive intense enjoyment from watching his new wife, as she presided, as mistress, with ease and grace at the head of his table. He would have liked to have had her to walk about the grounds

with him this lovely morning, but her wish to go at once to her mother was natural and right; and Margaret ever thinking of his pleasure, begged him to take Amy in her place.

"Don't expect me back till the afternoon," the wife said, as the husband was settling her, with no end of fussing as to her comfort, in the carriage which she was entering for the first time as her own; "my mother is sure to have a bit of lunch for me, and she will want to hear all about Wales, and to impart to me all the domestic troubles that have befallen her in my absence. I cannot make my first visit a short one you know."

"However brief it was," answered David, "it would seem long to me; but take your own time, love, and be sure you ask your mother to come and dine with us soon. Give the invitation as a special message from me."

Margaret laughed a little sadly, and shook her head—

“Thank you, dear,” she said, returning the parting squeeze of her husband’s hand ;
 “I will deliver the invitation and endorse it with all the personal eloquence I can get up for the occasion, but—but—I much fear we shall find it a hard matter to entice the mistress of Abbotsmead to quit her own fireside, even for half-a-day, for ours.”

CHAPTER XIII.

MARGARET CALLS UPON HER MOTHER.


It was a strange feeling to Margaret to be seated in her own luxurious carriage, a perfectly free woman, and to be rolling rapidly along that bright sunny road towards her old home. She had scarcely, till now, had a moment of solitude since her marriage, and it would have been only natural had she taken this opportunity for vigilant introspection, for asking herself if she were as happy as she had expected to be, and if the husband of her choice had so far come up to the ideal standard she had formed of him. This, I say, would have been quite natural

under the circumstances, and had Margaret been a younger woman there is little doubt that she would so have employed the half-hour it took to get from the Hall to Abbotsmead. Very youthful wives find a certain charm in magnifying their disenchantments, in moralizing to themselves, if not to their bosom friends, on the vanity of all earthly hopes, in setting their husbands' frailties and shortcomings in the foreground, and contemplating them, with indulgence perhaps, but certainly with the unalterable persuasion that they themselves are more or less victims, and the future lying before them a dim mysterious territory, with clouds and thick darkness brooding solemnly over it.

But as we get on in life—a life that has so many grave and earnest cares—we are more solicitous to keep our strength for these, and not to expend it on even the most interesting woes of the imagination.

And thus it happened that David Fletcher's wife, driving alone that autumn day, and realizing that she was possessed of many substantial blessings, abstained from any self-questioning whatever, declined to meditate upon those grievances which she knew must meet her continually in her new home, and gazed out at the brilliant sunshine and the cloudless skies with a thankful heart, and a stedfast determination to be happy as long as she could, and to make the best, now and always, of the lot in life she had, intelligently and with open eyes, chosen for herself.

Mrs. Bellew had not been warned of her daughter's visit this morning (which was certainly an error of judgment on Margaret's part, as she knew, of old, that that lady detested being taken by surprise); consequently, when Mrs. David Fletcher, in all her matron stylishness and elegance of costume, walked abruptly, and unannounced,



into the room where her mother was sitting in her most absolute *deshabille*, and with her usual heaps of coarse needlework scattered around her, the mistress of Abbotsmead started violently, and uttered an ejaculation that was not expressive of unmixed delight.

"Dear mother," said Margaret, with emotion (this first home-coming of a newly-married wife *must* always be an agitating time to any woman with ordinary feeling), "it was just a fancy of my own to swoop down upon you unawares, and I never thought you could mind *me*. We only arrived at the Hall last night; so, you see, I have lost no time; and I told David you would give me a bit of lunch. I was longing so to come to you."

"Very good of you, I am sure," jerked out the ruffled parent, who, however ashamed of her irritation, could not forego the manifestation of it, "considering what a grand lady you have become, and how extremely

humble my pretensions are in comparison. Had I known I should be receiving visitors from the Hall this morning, I should at least have put on a cleaner cap, and made some little difference in my general toilette. I feel disgraced in my own person, when I look at you and your finery. There, sit down, child: but for pity's sake don't sit too near me, because of the contrast. Of course, I am glad to see you, only you might have written one line to announce your approach."

Margaret scarcely knew whether to laugh or to cry at this questionable reception. She sat down, however, untied her bonnet, threw off her shawl, and then asked, smiling, whether her mother thought she looked still like "visitors from the Hall."

"You don't look much like your old self, at any rate," grumbled the elder lady, making a weak pretence of being wholly engrossed with her sewing, while it was abundantly evident that all her thoughts and

interest were yearning towards the daughter she was snubbing. "Why, you are as thin again as when you left Abbotsmead for London, and your complexion isn't half as pretty as it was. Of course, fine feathers make fine birds, and I don't say that you haven't a certain new style about you that is well enough, but I liked you better as you were before. I suspect," she added, with a scrutinizing look into her daughter's calm face, "that the shoe is beginning to pinch somewhere already, though, of course, I don't expect you to tell me so."

"I am very happy," said Margaret, with an earnest sincerity of tone that ought to have been convincing. "My husband is only too kind and good to me; and though Miss Elizabeth gave herself a few airs last night, as we quite anticipated she would. Amy was as sweet and affectionate in her welcome as it was possible to be. I am sure my youngest step-daughter will be a

great comfort to me. She is a dear child, and as simple and humble as the other is worldly-wise and imperious."

"And, pray, do you know whom you have to thank for Miss Amy's good behaviour and softened feelings towards her father's new wife?" exclaimed Mrs. Bellew, in an amusingly triumphant tone. "You thought, I daresay, that the young lady's sweetness was spontaneous, or due to the unaided discovery, on her part, of extraordinary merit on yours. I am sorry to dispel your illusion, but justice constrains me to do so, and to tell you—"

"What Amy has herself forestalled you in telling me," interrupted Margaret, with a little triumph in her turn; "namely, that Mr. Spenser has spoken kindly of me, and exhorted this dear child, in whom he evidently takes a warm interest, to treat me well. I am very sincerely obliged to him for his friendly offices, but I should not think

the less of them or of him if he had allowed the matter to remain between himself and Amy. It was scarcely necessary or generous to come and boast of his good deeds to you."

"He did not boast of them," said the mother, rather hotly. "He only mentioned them casually, when I was asking him one day whether Amy ever spoke of you, and if she seemed inclined to follow her sister's example in setting you at defiance, and making your life miserable, or had any better feelings of her own to guide her. Then he told me that he was in the habit of talking to her, and advising her respecting her behaviour towards her father's new wife, and that she had promised him to be gentle and docile, whatever her sister chose to be. Fie upon you, Margaret! for your ingratitude towards this excellent man," concluded Mrs. Bellew, fairly worked up now through the strength of her own eloquence. "Why, if it were not for his neighbourly kindness and

attention, my life would be lonely and desolate indeed. He comes out at least twice a week for an hour's chat, and to bring me a few flowers or a little fruit. Considering I am an old woman, with no attractive daughter at home, and nothing whatever to tempt him, you must allow that this is the very essence of disinterestedness and Christian charity. I am sure I feel that I can never be grateful enough."

"Of course, mamma, he enjoys a gossip with you," replied Margaret, who was not going to let this angelic Rector prove the occasion of a quarrel between her mother and herself. "If you *are* an old woman, and you know you don't *look* your age, any more than I look mine, you are a very clever one, and can talk admirably on most subjects. The Ditchley ladies are narrow-minded and local to a painful extent, therefore I am of opinion that Mr. Spenser pleases himself, and shows his good taste, by coming out

often to see you. Nevertheless—" she added, feelingly—" if he is any comfort to you, my dear mother, in your loneliness, I too will be grateful to him, and set this good work on a higher level than I have assigned to his championship of myself."

Now this was such a pretty filial speech, and the cheerful temper of the maker of it was evidently so unassailable this morning, that Mrs. Bellew decided abruptly on laying down her weapons of warfare, and becoming social and agreeable. She even put aside her work, and suggested a turn in the garden, first, however, begging Margaret to excuse her while she changed her dress, and spoke a word to Priscilla concerning the dinner.

"Anything will do for me, you know," said the self-invited guest, with a sudden dread that her arrival was threatening to interfere with the methodical and strictly economical arrangements of the Abbotsmead kitchen. "Pray don't add a single dish to your bill of fare on my account."

"Oh, I am not going to make a stranger of you, my dear," (spoken pleasantly and even facetiously). "There is a small steak pudding for dinner, just enough for two, so I shall desire Priscilla to cook a rasher of bacon for herself, and to get a bit of cabbage to eat with it from the garden. This, and the giving out of a couple more potatoes, will include the whole of the alterations your coming has entailed. Nothing to weigh seriously upon your conscience, you see."

Margaret did see, and decided secretly that the most sensitive or morbid conscience in the world might take its rest under such circumstances. In her mother's absence, she indulged in a leisurely survey of the familiar and somewhat gloomy room, in which during the last six months she had spent so many dull and weary hours; and, more inclined for dreaming now than she had been in the carriage an hour ago, her thoughts went back to the long years of her monotonous

girlhood, to the useless life she had been constrained to lead, and to the vain aspirations she had always had towards a life of effort, of honest striving, of work that should not all end in saving money, or keeping up a respectable appearance before the world, but bear at least some fruit for the happiness or good of others.

She had obtained the desire of her heart now. She had vowed herself bravely, if not quite fearlessly, to a woman's special mission. She was full of hope that she should ultimately succeed in all she had undertaken—and she felt this morning, as she sat there in her old home, remembering the slow sad years of idle inaction forced upon her, that were the discouragements of her present position ten-fold greater than was actually the case, she would still choose it without a moment's hesitation, in preference to her former life. Anyhow, she was living now (because she had to think and watch and

plan and do for others), whereas, in all that aimless past she had been thrown upon herself, and in danger of growing into a mere machine with human breath to animate it.

Perhaps had Mrs. Bellew been shown her newly-wedded daughter's thoughts, she would, after marvelling hugely at the fantastic colours of some amongst them, have warned her, out of her own larger and wider experience, to wait a bit before making up her mind that the battle-field she had entered on had so many advantages over the old peaceful, if humdrum, valley of her girlhood. At any rate, I think she would have told her not to make sure of the crown of victory while as yet she scarcely knew what fighting in earnest meant.

But Margaret kept her own counsel, and devoted herself to the task of amusing and cheering her mother during the remainder of her visit at Abbotsmead. They strolled about the sunny garden and orchard till

dinner-time, and then they shared the small beef-steak pudding with appetite, and, on Margaret's part, with warm commendations of its merits, which drew from Mrs. Bellew an expression of rejoicing that sumptuous living, and dainty dishes every day, had not spoiled Mrs. Fletcher for simpler fare.

When Margaret towards the last, delivered her husband's invitation to her mother, backing it up with quite a coaxing entreaty of her own, Mrs. Bellew spoke out in her own terse and characteristic way.

"Never, my dear, never ! so let us understand each other at once. Come and see me whenever you can, bring your husband when it pleases you both to do so, bring the youngest girl even, if she has any fancy for the occasional change ; but don't ask me to set my foot inside your grand house, for I don't intend to do it. My independence and self-respect are pretty nearly all that are left me now," she added, with

some approach to pathos, "and these, by your leave, I will keep."

Margaret was very sorry, though she had been prepared for some such answer. It certainly did occur to her to wonder in what way any mother's independence and self-respect could be compromised by visiting a married daughter in her own home, and with the husband not only willing but anxious to give her a cordial welcome; but Mrs. Fletcher wisely decided to ask no questions. If there was an explanation it would be sure to ooze out in time; if not, an attempt to extort one would be equally sure to give offence.

So Margaret only kissed her mother affectionately as she entered her carriage (which David had sent quite half an hour before the time she had arranged for it to come), and said she would soon, in any case, repeat her own visit to Abbotsmead—very soon.


CHAPTER XIV.

A GUEST AT THE HALL.

Not finding her husband waiting for her on the hall steps as she had expected, Margaret hastened to the library (in which room he had told her he should spend the morning), and there discovered that he was detained by a visitor, whose sudden animation on the entrance of Mrs. Fletcher would seem to imply that it was on her account he had been lingering. David's face, however, expressed anything but satisfaction, as he rose instantly on the opening of the door to greet his wife, and said in a voice of forced resignation, "My love, here is Mr. Spenser. He

has been with me some time, but I believe," (with a poor attempt at a smile) "that his visit is really to you. Shall we come now to the drawing-room?"

"Oh, it is very comfortable and pleasant here, I think," replied Margaret, shaking hands cordially with the Rector, and appearing, as she really was, glad to see him. "We need not make so great a stranger of Mr. Spenser as to insist on taking him to our state reception-room. I conclude *you* have been thanking this kind friend, as I wish to do now, for interesting himself so much with dear Amy. Indeed," (turning with her own sweet and gracious smile to the Rector,) "I feel we can never be sufficiently grateful. Regular work is just what the child needed, and the knowledge that you overlook all she does in the parish gives her just the stimulus and the stability that young beginners require. It is so very good of you."



Mr. Spenser smiled deprecatingly, as in duty bound, but gave every evidence of liking this commendation from Mrs. David Fletcher. He said it was, in reality, entirely through her that his interest in Amy had first been excited. Mr. Fletcher had called on him one day and mentioned Miss Bellew's suggestion concerning his youngest daughter, and he (the Rector) had felt infinite pleasure in being able in any way to carry out this admirable idea. No praise was due to him in the matter. Miss Amy was a very tractable, estimable young lady, and more than repaid any trouble he had taken with her.

"By-the-by, where *is* Amy?" inquired Margaret of her husband, who was not joining in the conversation between their guest and herself, but whose disturbed aspect she had failed as yet to notice; "I am sure she would come in if she knew who was here."

"I have not seen her since she walked in

the grounds with me early this morning," replied David, in a wholly uninterested voice; "but as the pony carriage was ordered after lunch, she has probably driven out with her sister."

"Oh, I am quite sorry," said Margaret, "as I know she, herself, will regret having missed the Rector. But perhaps," she added quickly, addressing that complacently-smiling gentleman, who appeared altogether rooted to his chair, "perhaps Mr. Spenser will stay and dine with us in an unceremonious way? I believe our dinner hour is six, and it is past five now. May we hope that you will do us all this pleasure?"

It was not until the Rector had testified his satisfaction at Mrs. Fletcher's very friendly invitation, and cordially accepted it, that poor Margaret discovered (more by intuition than by any open signs), that she had committed an error of some sort. David had immediately endorsed his wife's first

little act of matron hospitality, by saying, even before Mr. Spenser had time to speak—

“Ah, do stay, if you don’t mind taking us as we are; it will give Mrs. Fletcher pleasure, and my daughters, of course, will be delighted at any addition to the family party—”

Upon which the Rector had hastened, naturally, to reply that he should be only too happy if they would excuse his dress, and if he should not be in the way between now and dinner-time.


Then Margaret, vaguely but most uncomfortably conscious that something was wrong, asked their guest if he would like to take a turn on the lawn, or in the shrubberies, while she changed her out-of-door costume, or until the young ladies returned.

Mr. Spenser said he should like it excessively (he was plainly in the humour for liking whatever his charming hostess suggested to-day), and looked towards David,

anticipating that he was coming into the garden, too—but David did not stir, nor appear to understand that he was expected to do so, and the reverend gentleman, possibly not caring very much for the society of his host just then, rose and went out alone.

Margaret saw the library door close upon her husband and herself with thankfulness. She was not going to let any coolness or misapprehension grow between them for lack of courage or promptitude in speaking, on her own part. That David Fletcher would be a difficult man to deal discreetly with, his over sensitive mind a difficult instrument to keep always in tune, Margaret had not to learn to-day; but she was really profoundly in the dark as to what special chord she had struck unskilfully this afternoon, and her fixed determination was to get the mystery solved at once.

So walking up to his chair, the moment



they were alone, she said, in her very gentlest and most winning voice—

“David, you are vexed with me for something I have done, and I am quite prepared to be repentant when I know what it is ; only I must know it *at once*. You might miss the sorrow if I learned my fault later. Did I take too much on myself in giving an invitation the first day of presiding here as mistress ? Tell me frankly, if this is it, as indeed it may well be. I did it without thinking of myself.”

David’s face, as his wife spoke, expressed a mingling of sadness, astonishment, and unbounded love.

“My dearest wife,” he exclaimed, drawing her to a chair beside him, and kissing her passionately ; “never, never, cherish such a wild and irrational idea again. My house is your house, now and always ; my privileges are your privileges ; and if you had a fancy for inviting all Ditchley to dine here

every day of the week, I should not complain, except that I should grudge them your attention, and mourn the loss of your exclusive society. Do you believe me, Margaret? are you convinced that you have been suggesting an utter impossibility?"

"Then, what *is* the matter?" said Margaret, returning bravely to the point, notwithstanding her husband's evident wish to get out of an explanation. "Had you any reason of your own for not wanting the Rector to dine with us to-day?"

"I see you have a talent for pushing a man into a corner, and pinning him securely there," the husband answered now, with a dubious smile, and some slight increase of colour. "I am not especially fond of Mr. Spenser, Margaret—I never was—and all this long morning I have been looking forward to your coming home in time for us to have had a little stroll together before you changed your dress. It did seem

cruelly hard to have that man sitting there and thwarting all my plans. I knew he was staying for you, and I should not have minded if he would have been content to take leave after he had seen you, but he positively would not move; he was oblivious of all the rules of good breeding. I know, my love, that you were driven to do what you did, by his tiresome persistency. Of course, I ought not to have been annoyed; but it has been a lost day to me, Margaret, and if I have shown some bad temper you must generously forgive me."

"That I will do readily, David," said Margaret with a gentle gravity that was not less marked because of its gentleness, "but you must not think I could not have helped asking the Rector to dine here. I did not feel driven to it in any way; but besides that I believed Amy would like to see and talk with her friend, in her own home; the idea had suddenly crossed my

mind that his presence would make it easier for Elizabeth to get through her first meal with her detested stepmother, and be, in some sense, a relief to all of us. This was my feeling and motive in asking him to stay. I am sorry now that I did it, but indeed you must be just, and blame me for what is done—not the poor innocent Rector.”

Then she stood up to go, but lingered a moment to kiss her husband, who was looking half ashamed of himself, but very far from happy.

“I am sure you are quite right,” he called out, as the wife moved towards the door, “and I shall get into a better mood by-and-by. You have promised to forgive me, remember, Margaret—this is above all essential to my recovery and contentment;—do you hear?”

The wife smiled back her answer, with which, it is to be presumed, the husband

was satisfied ; but to her had come a strange and startling revelation ; and though, as yet, she was very far from understanding its full significance, her heart sank fathoms deep in contemplating its threatening visage.

The Rector was still enjoying his solitary walk on the lawn, when the pony carriage, with the young ladies in it, drove to the hall door. Having assisted them to alight, and observed that Elizabeth was not in a propitious temper, he allowed her to pass on up the steps alone, and invited Amy to remain awhile with him in the grounds. This, the latter was very pleased to do, for she had had a dreary time at the cemetery with her elder sister, and would have welcomed anything or anybody who was likely to lead her thoughts into a new current. She stayed talking to Mr. Spenser, and thinking him nicer and pleasanter than ever, until a servant came from the house

to say that Mr. and Mrs. Fletcher were in the drawing-room, and that they begged their guest to join them there.

Then Amy, who had still to get dressed herself, ran up to Elizabeth's room, and told her that the Rector was staying to dinner. She judged that it would be agreeable news.

"Oh, he's nobody," respectfully observed the eldest Miss Fletcher, as she dismissed her maid to wait on the younger sister—"otherwise, I should not appear at table, to take a lower seat than that woman. I never will dine with them when they have real company—it would be too humiliating and detestable. Rather odd, was it not, for papa to invite any stranger the first day of his new wife's rule in the establishment? I suppose he is in a hurry to show her off."

"I believe it was Mrs. Fletcher, herself, who asked the Rector to stay," replied Amy,

giving this information simply because she knew it to be the truth. He told me so just now, and seemed immensely gratified."

"Upon my word," exclaimed Miss Elizabeth, with an inimitable toss of her patrician nose, "this young woman takes kindly to her new dignity, and reminds one of the vulgar proverb, 'Set a beggar on horseback,' &c. For *sang froid* and presumption, commend me to spinsters who succeed in catching rich husbands late in life. She might have waited a few days before issuing her invitations, I do think; but the Rector *is* the Rector, I suppose, and to be honoured at any cost. Pleasant for papa! but I don't pity him one bit."

Amy looked and felt vexed at these un-called-for and ungenerous remarks, and would gladly have stood up in Margaret's defence had there been time; but it was nearly six now, and theirs had always been a punctual household; so she had no choice

but to hurry away to the duties of her own modest toilette, leaving Elizabeth to the stormy and bitter meditations which, judging from the unlovely acts of her daily life, were the usual companions of her solitude.

But the Rector's presence did, as Margaret had foreseen, act as a wholesome check upon this young lady's haughtiness and insolence to-day. She chose a seat at the dinner-table the farthest removed from Mrs. Fletcher, although the new mistress of the house had courteously invited her to one on the right hand nearest her own. She never voluntarily addressed Margaret, but when the latter spoke to her she answered without glaring incivility, and with Mr. Spenser and her sister she conversed, from time to time, pleasantly and good-temperedly enough. David behaved very well, too, considering how little he really appreciated the society of his accomplished pastor, but he looked

restless and uncomfortable, even in the midst of his efforts to be agreeable ; and thus the real burden of entertaining their guest devolved on Margaret, both during dinner and in the evening, when they all adjourned together to the spacious drawing-room, and, with tea-drinking and conversation, made a fair show at least of being a social party.

It was Elizabeth who condescended to apologize for the absence of the piano, explaining to the Rector, who was fond of music, that she had caused it to be taken to her own private room, that her playing or singing might not disturb "other people;" upon which her father, angry at her choice of terms, added, with some severity, that *after* this evening their friends would not, he hoped, be deprived of an amusement which was to be met with in almost the humblest homes now, as he had sent an order that very morning to London for the finest

instrument his agent could procure, for Mrs. Fletcher.

This was news to Margaret, as well as to Elizabeth, and she turned to her husband with such a grateful, loving look, that David was the brighter for it all the rest of the evening, while Mr. Spenser, having seen it likewise, could not help thinking that David Fletcher had been born under a peculiarly lucky star, and because he was haunted by this thought, and was sorry for it, his conscience dictated to him the frequent repetition, mentally, of the tenth commandment.

A woman with less perfect self-possession and fewer intellectual resources than Margaret, would have found it next to impossible to lead the conversation into pleasant channels to-night, and to give each member of the small, and not particularly congenial party, a chance of being more or less interested and amused. But she managed it all admirably, and without apparent

effort, though beneath that calm surface the waters were very far from tranquil, and if the hearts of some of her companions knew their own bitterness, hers was not behind-hand in this mournful knowledge.

The Rector had the discretion not to stay very late, but he said, in taking leave of his host and hostess, that he had spent an exceptionally delightful evening, and that he should indulge the hope of being permitted to come again soon and hear the new piano.

This time Margaret held her tongue, delegating to her husband and his daughters the obligation of urging their guest to repeat his visit, according to her own expressed desire.


The young ladies both spoke warmly and earnestly, and David, courteously though *not* warmly, endorsed all their hospitable assertions. When Mr. Spenser looked towards Margaret for her assent, she only said gently—

“I have not thanked you half enough for

your very kind attentions to my mother. She so thoroughly enjoys and appreciates your neighbourly calls, that I do hope you will continue them."

The Rector bowed low over the hand he was holding, and replied that he was always well-pleased when he had leisure to spend an hour at Abbotsmead. Now that he knew Mrs. Fletcher's wishes, he should endeavour to make time to go there oftener.

Truly a very amiable and courtly rector ! It was scarcely a matter of wonder that poor David Fletcher, with his morbid self-consciousness and over-weening humility, should have indulged in many perplexed and torturing speculations that night.




CHAPTER XV.

BETWEEN HUSBAND AND WIFE.

THERE are very few households, especially large ones, which having been left more than a year without a regular mistress, would not require some careful looking into, some judicious reorganizing in many of their departments, and this quite irrespective of the efficiency or non-efficiency of any hired subordinate who may have filled during that time a mistress's place. Margaret liked what she saw of Mrs. Barrington very much, was thoroughly convinced of her faithfulness ; but while approving nearly all of this good woman's arrangements, and warmly

praising whatever was deserving of praise, she quietly took the reins of government into her own hands, and soon found that she should be able, by so doing, to save her husband at least a fourth of his income.

Of course this assumption of absolute authority on Mrs. Fletcher's part, involved a tolerable amount of daily work, and the dedication of an hour or two every morning to the store-room, pantry, and servants' hall, with occasionally an extra hour for book-keeping and accounts in Mrs. Barrington's snug parlour. But it was labour that Margaret took to very kindly, and for which she seemed to have (perhaps by inheritance) a very special gift. In her mother's house she had never been allowed to do anything, and, as I have said before, she had felt her uselessness and her negative position cruelly, from the time her woman's life had begun. Now she had freedom, abundance of occupation, and the ever present consciousness



that it was good for her to work hard, that it kept her body healthy, and her mind from dwelling exclusively on certain shadows which she knew to be hovering round the threshold of her home, but whose actual entrance she wisely resolved to oppose as long as she possibly could. It was a matter of thankfulness and sincere gratification to her also, that the servants of the establishment obeyed her not only readily but zealously. They had certainly none of them been spoiled by the overkindness or consideration of their former mistress; and the new Mrs. Fletcher's winning graciousness and unassuming ways, even while claiming and exercising absolute dominion, gained her their hearty liking, and made her, in her own household, a very popular little lady indeed.

But there was one individual in the establishment who was very far from approving of Margaret's devotion to her housewifely

duties, and this was no less a person than David Fletcher himself. He grudged every minute of time that his wife spent below stairs ; he wanted her always near him. In fine weather he liked an early walk in the morning, and a drive in the afternoon, In wet weather Margaret must sit with him all day, sometimes reading aloud to him if he happened to be lazy ; but oftener he himself being the reader while she painted or worked, hour after hour, at his side.

The domestic duties I have spoken of, did not, in point of fact, interfere much with David's exactingness ; but he hated and was jealous of them, nevertheless. Mrs. Barrington had managed very well hitherto, he said—why not let her manage still ? He did not care about saving a few pounds a week ; it was ridiculous for Margaret to slave for this. He would much prefer indeed paying for a dozen extra servants, if by so doing he could have more of his wife's society.

All of which Margaret listened to with a dutiful attention, never manifesting impatience at the weakness of her husband's arguments, never interrupting him while he was speaking, but, at the same time, always going on with a quiet persistence in her own ways.

But there came a day when David was goaded into a more open expression of his feelings than he had hitherto ventured on, and when husband and wife approached nearer to a misunderstanding than they had ever thought to do.

Margaret had, on this occasion, been detained downstairs longer than she was herself aware of, and she had, unfortunately, promised to be unusually quick, knowing that David had some reason for wishing to get out early, some house to call at, on business, where he might fail to see those he was seeking, at a later hour.

When she came up-stairs at last, she

found her husband standing in the hall, with his hat and stick in his hand, and his face expressive both of irritation and impatience.

“I know I have kept you waiting, David,” she said, with a whole world of penitence in her voice, “and, indeed, I am very, very sorry, and ashamed of myself into the bargain; but I won’t be a minute in getting my bonnet on, and we can walk fast to make up for lost time.”

David allowed her to pass him without a word. It would only have wasted moments to detain her now; but when she returned, dressed and smiling, he opened the hall door a little sharply, and, offering his arm, led the way to their own grounds, instead of to the lodge that opened into the road they were to have taken.

“It is much too late to call at Bennett’s now,” he said drily; “besides, I am sure you must be tired to death, and quite unfit

for a long walk. I will go with you once round the shrubberies, and then you had better rest quietly till the afternoon."

"Rest from *what?*" inquired Margaret, who would have been compelled to laugh if she had not seen that her husband was really displeased with her.

"Why, from your absurd slavery downstairs, amongst your servants," exclaimed David excitedly. "I was under the impression, till lately, that they had been properly trained to do the whole work of the house; but it seems I was mistaken, since my wife thinks it necessary to spend half her days, and more than half her strength, in assisting them. You must forgive me, Margaret, if I fail to see the reasonableness of your domestic drudgery. When you consented to become my wife, I hoped and believed I was securing an affectionate and intellectual companion for myself. I never dreamt that you

would choose a housekeeper's duties for your own pleasure."

Margaret might justly have retorted that if her husband did not see the reasonableness of her domestic drudgery, neither did she perceive the reasonableness of his childish complaints; but she was far too wise a woman to bandy words, and though seriously vexed at all he had said, as well as at his manner of saying it, she only replied—

"I am very sorry you should take such a view of the insignificant labour I have thought it right, as mistress of your house, to appropriate to myself, David. Of course if you insist upon my relinquishing it, I will do so."

"Oh, I insist upon nothing," he hastened to add, perhaps a little touched by her gentleness and ready submission. "I wish you to be happy in your own way, Margaret, only, loving you as I do, I cannot endure the idea that you relish these works

of supererogation more than being with me."

"Oh, David, you are cruel now," said Margaret, with difficulty steadying her voice. "You *must* know that I always enjoy being with you; only I conscientiously believed, and believe still, that it is the duty of every wife to superintend the affairs of her husband's household. Does not even Solomon, in describing a model woman, say of her, 'She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness?'"

"No doubt he does—you know best," remarked David, with no abatement of discontent in his tones. "But, Margaret, you are for ever harping upon duty, it seems to me. Duty is all very well, but I want my wife, first and foremost, to be personally happy—happy as other wives are, who love their husbands. I charged you, solemnly, in that little temple we shall pass in a

minute or two—I charged you, solemnly, Margaret, to make sure, before you took me for your husband, that you could give me your *whole* heart. You said you could. God help us both if you were mistaken! My dearest wife,” he continued, with sudden passion and pathos—“my wife, whom I worship with an almost insane idolatry—it kills me to think you are not entirely happy with me, or that you can, at least, find as much happiness in weighing out tea and sugar, and casting up accounts, as in my society—liking both chiefly because it is your duty to like them.”

He paused here, because he had really worked himself into a state of very uncomfortable excitement, and probably felt that it would be imprudent to go on. Margaret had her own heart-sinkings, her own unfeigned distress at her husband’s morbid fancies, to battle with by-and-by. But her first anxiety, her first endeavour, must be to

pour oil upon the troubled waters of his restless soul.

"Dear David," she said, very gently and very calmly, "what an inveterate self-tormentor, you are! Will nothing ever cure you of taking to the rack on your own account, and for the simple amusement, as it would appear, of hearing your poor bones crunching and breaking upon it? I spoke the pure truth that day in the summer-house; and what was the truth then is the truth, in a fuller sense, now. My whole heart *is* yours, and I am quite happy as your wife; only, since we are come to explanations, and to justifying ourselves each to the other, in this early stage of our married life, I will confess that I have feared, occasionally, you are not quite happy as my husband."

"If I am not, Margaret," replied David, in a tone that hid even more than it expressed; "it is not from loving you too little, but from loving you too much. But

I *am* happy, supremely happy, my dearest wife, whenever you are with me, and I can feel that you are wholly my own. It is mistrust of myself, after all, infinitely more than mistrust of you, that sometimes plunges me into the lowest depths. When I look at other men, I am often tempted to recall my first wife's constant and bitter assertion, that no woman on the face of the earth could ever really care for *me*."

Margaret knew that for "other men" "Mr. Spenser, the rector of Ditchley," would be the correct reading just now; but she kept this unpleasant knowledge to herself, and only said—

"Well, David, I suppose I have no choice but to leave you to your folly, until experience brings you wisdom. I can't go on dining the present tense of the verb "to love" in your ears from morning till night, without wearying us both. Even if I varied the exercise, by putting it one day into French

and another into high Dutch, you would still find it monotonous, I expect. Come, let us enter into a compact. I will give up weighing out tea and sugar, and reinstate Mrs. Barrington in all her ancient privileges, if you will give up doubting your wife's affection, and leading her to fear that she has missed the way to enrich your life. David, David," she concluded, with earnest feeling, "it would break my heart if this were the truth. I can only be happy in proportion as I secure your happiness. I am a woman, you know, and the colours in our lives are all reflected from the colours, be they bright or dull, in yours."

Then David was satisfied and re-assured—for the moment at any rate—and telling his patient wife that she was an angel of goodness, a blessing far greater than he had ever hoped for or could ever deserve, he promised, under no circumstances, to doubt her again, and implored her to go on with

her household work for just as long as it amused or interested her. His repentance and amiability were, in fact, so strikingly displayed, that Margaret, who wanted a still further concession from him, hastened wisely to make hay while the sun was shining.

At the risk of being accused again of thinking always of duty, she entered boldly upon the subject of Amy's neglected education, and told her husband that she should like to devote a couple of hours, twice or thrice a week, to giving this poor child lessons in drawing and music.


"Amy wishes it herself," she continued, coaxingly, "and you know, David, there is my beautiful new piano almost wasted, because you don't care for me to use it except a little in the evenings—you are not a great lover of music, if you speak honestly, and would rather have me reading or talking to you at any time, than listen to my

choicest fantasias. Well, I have yielded as regards myself and my own performance on the instrument, but I cannot endure to see your splendid gift standing useless in its place. Elizabeth will never be sufficiently gracious to play on it when we are alone—I wish she would—therefore, unless it may be made of service to Amy, I shall really regret its purchase. With regular lessons she would be encouraged to practise diligently, a thing she has not done, by her own confession, since they were in Paris. Elizabeth is too indifferent to urge her sister to any exertion. How she spends her own days, when not driving out, is a mystery to me, unless she has an extensive correspondence—”

“That she cannot have,” said David; “and I believe she dislikes what you women call fancy work. Probably she reads French novels. I am sure she looks dull and listless enough whenever she condescends to appear amongst us; but about Amy and

this music business. Of course, my love, if you desire to make a teacher as well as a housekeeper of yourself, I must submit, but why not engage a resident governess again? I will advertise to-morrow for one, if you don't object."

"Amy is too old for a governess now," replied Margaret, with quiet decision. "She would not like it, and the plan would be undesirable in many ways. My idea is to give her what help I can, in music and drawing, for a few months; and then, perhaps, after Christmas, we might go to London, and let her have the benefit of masters—I do not mean," she added quickly, catching her husband's surprised and not enchanted look—"our going to London to have any reference to the season, or its gaieties, but only to give the girls a change, and the opportunity of a little more amusement than they can get in the country. Elizabeth is literally moping herself to



death; her life is unnatural and unhealthy to the last degree; and I cannot forget, David, that her shrinking from me is the chief cause of this. It will be good for them both to be taken now and then into more stirring scenes, and if I may speak plainly, David, it will be equally good for you."

"Oh, Margaret!" exclaimed the husband pathetically, and even with some alarm in his voice, "don't say that. I hate stirring scenes. I have never had much to do with the busy world, or my busy fellow-creatures in it. Nothing would distress me more than to be thrust into society, or into any so called pleasure hunting now. I am not a young man, remember, my love, and in obtaining you I obtained all I could ever desire. If the girls want change, they can go to their aunt, or I would even ask one of our county matrons to take them up with her own family for a season; but don't

drag me to London, Margaret, I implore of you. Have your own way in everything else—teach Amy music and drawing, give out stores and add up figures to any amount with Dame Barrington ; see what friends and neighbours you like in our own house, do anything and everything, so long as you leave me here in peace, and stay with me yourself. Is this being *very* selfish and exacting ? ”

“ No,” said Margaret ; “ but it is being very ill-judged and short-sighted. No man *can* be the better for dwelling apart from his fellow-men. You have done this far too much all your life, David. I should like to see your sympathies widened, your means of enjoyment varied, and, above all, your energies quickened. You *have* energy latent somewhere, but you make no use of it. I wish you would take to farming, or to building, or write a book,—anything to give you a real interest in life over and above

your interest in me. Dear David," (in a half jesting half serious tone) "I may one of these days be spirited away from you. I may die first, and what would you then have to fall back upon?"

"Utter despair!" groaned David, who did not relish the turn the matrimonial dialogue was taking—"the blackness of darkness for ever. But, my dearest wife, for mercy's sake, don't suggest such a terrible possibility, unless you wish to see how wretched you can make your husband. You don't feel ill, do you, Margaret—you have no *reason* for that startling observation?"

"No, I have not," said Margaret laughing. "No reason, at least, that refers to myself, or my health, which is perfect at present. But at the same time, I only spoke a simple truth, and therefore, David, you must really consider my suggestion, and try what you can do. You might begin a book

when I begin my lessons to Amy. How charming it would be."

"Not the book, my dear, I'll venture to swear," exclaimed poor David, who began to feel that he was being driven a little too hard this morning. "You might as well ask me to construct a balloon, and ascend to Jupiter in it, as to write anything that an intelligent public would read. No, no, Margaret, leave me to my uselessness and seclusion a few months more, and then we will talk of the London scheme. Even London would be less agonizing to me than the thought of writing a book."


Margaret laughed, (probably on the principle of the old saying, "Let those laugh who win") and thanking her husband very prettily for having yielded so much to her, she allowed him to have his way in taking her indoors, and placing her upon a sofa till luncheon time.

In a few days the music and painting

lessons were commenced in earnest, and both teacher and pupil appeared to enjoy them thoroughly, while David, not venturing to complain again, or to say how wearily he spent the hours thus devoted to instruction, really made a merit of necessity, and commended his wife warmly for her kindness to his little daughter.

When the rector came up to the Hall for another social evening—he had been a tolerably long time in availing himself of the friendly invitations given to him by all *but* Margaret on the last occasion—Amy played to him, and delighted him so much, that Elizabeth was amiable enough for once to sing, though this entailed the use of her stepmother's grand piano.

It ought to have been a cheerful evening for David, both his daughters shining, and Margaret doing her very utmost to keep them in the foreground, but, somehow or other, the very sight of Mr. Spenser in-



variably depressed and made a dull, silent man of him. This vexed the wife exceedingly, and redoubled her anxiety to get him more into general society, so that he might learn his own value, as an individual, and be delivered from his morbid and distressing self-consciousness.

She induced him to accompany her on all her return calls to their neighbours, both at Ditchley (where the people were too heavy and narrow-minded either to interest him or to do him much good in any way), and amongst the few county families who had thought it worth their while to make the acquaintance of the new Mrs. Fletcher. David's first wife had been so excessively unpopular that, little by little, the best of the neighbours had dropped off from intimacy at the Hall ; but they soon came to the conclusion that Margaret was a very different woman, and that the widower had done a good thing for himself in placing her

at the head of his household. Two or three invitations to dinner parties were the result of the first interchange of visits, and though David had a peculiar horror of dining out, he refrained from any open objection when Margaret said they must certainly go.

Elizabeth, being included, chose, for some freak of her own, to accompany her father and step-mother once, but as the latter on this occasion was made a great deal of and she herself, beyond being looked at, and possibly admired for her fine face and figure, was not distinguished in any way, the young lady declined to repeat her experiment, and thenceforth became gloomier and less agreeable in her own domestic circle than ever.

With Amy it was wholly different, and Margaret's liking for her pupil, and real interest in her for her own sake, as well as for her father's, increased every day. Very often she took her to Abbotsmead, and Mrs. Bellew grew to welcome Amy's visits and

sometimes to keep her for the whole afternoon, when it was convenient for Margaret to send the carriage a second time to bring her back. Here Amy frequently met the rector, who still kept up his neighbourly visits to the lonely lady of Abbotsmead, and who thought it very good of a young bright girl, and one too who left such a charming step-mother at home, to devote her time to the amusement of a blunt old woman whose "fine gold" was assuredly not upon the surface, and whose smoothness of temper even could not be always safely reckoned on.

And so the days and weeks passed swiftly by, and David, continuing to behave well, was neither urged again to write a book, or spoken to on the subject of going to London. Only, when Christmas was near at hand, and they had accepted the hospitality of many of their county neighbours, Margaret announced to him that they must soon give a dinner party themselves. It was a painful necessity

to her, no less than to him, especially in reference to Elizabeth, but there was no help for it, and she hoped he would endure it philosophically.

"Of course we must do it," he said, with a sigh—"and you are sure, my love, to manage everything beautifully—but Elizabeth *must* dine at table, and conduct herself properly, too, or people will be fancying all sorts of things. That girl is becoming a regular incubus."

"You had better speak to her when we have fixed the day," replied Margaret; "but be as gentle and conciliating as you can, David. Your eldest daughter is not one to bear much driving or spurring."

Margaret spoke advisedly, for in her pocket was a letter received that morning from Rhoda which contained, in a postscript, the following information and warning—

"My brother Herbert has just appeared in England. He never comes to this country

without a special object. I am afraid there is mischief brewing, and that E—— is in some way associated with it. Dear aunt Margaret, *pray* be watchful. I know you cannot do much, knowing so little; but do what you can for uncle's sake. I am dreadfully anxious."

CHAPTER XVI.

HERBERT MEREDITH.

IN a small West End dining-room which, cheerless and dingy looking enough at all times, presented on the November day I have to write about, and under the additional draw-back of a yellow London fog, an aspect of utter and most depressing gloom, sat, late in the afternoon, a young man who as far as symmetry of form, outline, and features went, might have served as a model for an Apollo, but who, had the expression of his face alone been concerned, would have done equally well for the study of a Lucifer.

It was a face that no one could look at

without exclaiming "how wonderfully and remarkably handsome!" and that few could see without thinking it a pity it did not belong to a woman. For though not absolutely an effeminate countenance, inasmuch as there were fine soft whiskers, and a silky beard of an auburn hue belonging to it, still it was not a manly one. The features were too decidedly of the Grecian type, the ears were too small, and the pale blue eyes, though they had assuredly no softness in their depths, were of that peculiar almond shape which is so much more common to the eyes of women than to those of the rougher sex.

But *as* a face, irrespective of sex, and the character it indicated, it was beyond all doubt marvellously attractive, and singularly handsome, especially considering that its owner was a Saxon by birth, and that though coming of a sufficiently good-looking race, none of his ancestors, as represented by carefully treasured portraits of long-waisted

gentlemen and short-waisted ladies on ivory, and none of the existing generation, as represented by his nearest and dearest, in any way came up to the perfection of outward form with which this young man had been endowed—a dangerous gift to himself—a fatal one to many others, who had been unhappy enough to cross his path.

For nearly an hour now he had been swaying himself backwards and forwards in a large American rocking-chair, placed exactly in front of a blazing fire, while he had smoked, at least, half a dozen choice cigars, the price of which would have kept one of his sister Rhoda's poor families in bread and meat a whole day. Apparently, however, neither the fumes of this rare tobacco, nor the genial warmth in which he was basking, nor the soothing motion of his luxurious chair, had done much towards improving the surly mood in which Mr. Herbert Meredith had entered his mother's house

an hour ago. He had been about a week in London, but he had not, as yet, given his own family a great deal of his company. He had no taste for a home life, and having come to England on business—so he said—it was more convenient and agreeable to him to take a bachelor lodging city way. But unfortunately, as this affectionate son deemed it, he had business that must be transacted with his mother, as well as with lawyers and creditors; so he had fixed to-day to dine with that lady, in her faded doll's house, on the outskirts of Belgravia; and having omitted to ascertain the hour when dinner was served in the miniature establishment, he had arrived, on speculation, considerably too early, and was in a frightful temper with himself and everybody in consequence.

At four o'clock, there was nothing but the glowing coals in the grate and the objects immediately in front of the fire to be seen

inside; nothing but the ever thickening yellow fog to be seen without. The young man stretched himself, gave one revolted gaze out of the clouded windows, uttered an ejaculation that, albeit in French, had a very ugly and suspicious sound, and then turned and pulled the bell handle with such viciousness that it is doubtful whether the same wire would ever be pulled with a successful result again.

A rather shabby page, in buttons, answered the call with praiseworthy alacrity. It is not unlikely that Mr. Herbert's temper was known to the different members of his mother's establishment, and that they did not care to encounter the lion when he was unchained and rampant.

"Here, you young reprobate," growled the gentleman, twisting round his neck lazily, to see who had entered the room—he had just before worried the coals into giving a temporary illumination—"stand

out in the light, can't you? A hero of your magnificent proportions should always occupy a conspicuous position, to be seen and admired, you know, as well as to hear and answer the questions that may be put to him. Now then, Sir Page, at what hour do you expect your mistress to arrive at home? Is it Mrs. Meredith's usual custom to go about shopping, and paying visits, in an exhilarating and becoming atmosphere like that which prevails in your charming metropolis this afternoon?"

The boy in buttons, having a faint idea that this was meant for wit, indulged in a very cautious grin, trusting that, if it was wrong, the dim light would be insufficient to betray him. Then he replied smartly—

"My mistress, sir, is not over partik'ler as to weather, being used to all sorts at this season, and to fogs, I may say, over and above every other kind. The time of her return, sir, is quite uncertain. Mostly, she's

in about four ; and when Miss Rhoda and herself are alone, their dinner hour is five. To-day, as you were expected, sir, it has been ordered for seven."

Mr. Herbert Meredith here uttered another ejaculation, which, being in plain English this time, the smart boy could not fail to understand. He was not so much shocked by it as a well brought up country lad would have been ; but being still of somewhat tender age, he interpreted it in his own way.

"It is a long time to wait, sir," he said, sympathetically, "more especially as you come pretty early ; but I can bring you a glass of sherry wine and a biscuit, if you will be pleased to make shift with those slight refreshments till seven."

"You and your slight refreshments be hanged !" shouted Mr. Herbert, looking very much tempted to hurl the poker at the unhappy page's head (for fine gentlemen of this stamp *must* vent their evil tempers on

somebody, and surely small boys in buttons are fair game). "They may keep their dinner till midnight for aught I care, but I want to speak to Mrs. Meredith. I have wasted half a day in this gloomy hole already. By-the-by," he added, as the page suddenly bethought himself of lighting the gas, as a possible means of improving Mr. Herbert's spirits, "where is Miss Meredith now? Does she accompany her mother on these cheerful expeditions by fog-light?"

"Oh, dear no, sir," said the boy, recovering his briskness as he saw that the poker retained its place; "but this happens to be one of Miss Rhoda's City and East-end days, and she and her maid Polly are mostly a little late. They have to get home by 'bus, you see, sir, and 'busses from the city to the West-end fill so fast of evenings. Polly tells us they are sometimes crushed awful, sir, but then, as she says, Miss Rhoda is such a hangel, that she don't mind nothink, if she

can do good to them poor creatures up in the slums. Polly says too, sir—”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, boy, spare me these hideous details!” interrupted the aristocratic brother, with a disgusted look and shudder; “and go back to your own regions now. If Mrs. Meredith does not arrive in a quarter of an hour from the present time, I shall be off, and you may give her my compliments, and say that I had important business elsewhere.”

But, as he spoke, a vehicle of some kind (Mrs. Meredith could not afford a carriage of her own, with such a hopelessly extravagant son), stopped abruptly before the door of the house, and the page, making a still more abrupt exit, exclaimed as he went,

“That is sure to be mistress, sir, and I will tell her how long you have been waiting in here.”

I think it has been intimated before that Mrs. Meredith, though not a woman of much

feeling, was very passionately fond of her handsome, good-for-nothing son. Hers was not a character to be repelled, to any great extent, by vice in the nobler sex, however severely she might judge it in every woman, except herself, under the canopy of heaven.

Nevertheless, there was no embracing when the two met on the present occasion, Herbert only nodding, in a careless fashion, as his mother bustled into the room, and the mother only saying, apologetically—

“My dear, I had no notion you could be here so early, or I would not have gone out. I am heart-broken at having kept you waiting for me, and at having missed a whole hour of your society that I might have enjoyed. But we shall have lots of time for talking before dinner. I may as well throw off my wraps, and stay with you now; and we will have a cup of tea or coffee together cosily. I can dress later when our gossip is over.”

"As you like," replied Herbert, yawning and looking ineffably bored in anticipation. "I was getting precious tired of this funereal apartment of yours, and thinking that Dante's inferno would be a delightful change. How *can* you live in London with your small means? I wonder your reason has not succumbed ages ago."

"Oh, I love London," said the still pretty Mrs. Meredith, as she took off her bonnet and furs, and made herself comfortable by the fire. "It suits me in every respect, and is, in fact, much more desirable than the country for people who are not rich. I hate poverty, of course," she added, with charming frankness, "but what is to be done? While a young gentleman like yourself, Herbert, with expensive tastes and habits, *will* lead an idle life, how can his adoring mother be otherwise than poor? By-the-by, how have you managed about those last bills? Have you been able to meet any of them?"

"Not one," answered Herbert, gloomily ; but I have contrived to renew them on terms that would make your hair stand straight. Those fellows have no more conscience and no more pity, than a block of marble. But warding off the payment of a debt is not going a long way towards filling one's pocket, is it, mother? and ready money I *must* have before I leave London, by hook or by crook."

"Then I fear you must see what hook or crook can do for you, my dear boy;" said Mrs. Meredith, with an attempt at facetiousness, while in truth her blood was running cold at the thought of the impending strife between herself and her profligate son. "To give you your regular allowance, I go without a thousand things that, in my position, I ought to have ; I can indulge in no luxuries whatever, and I cut a sufficiently miserable figure in the eyes of the world. To do more than I have always done, would be an

absolute impossibility, even supposing that, by reducing myself to beggary, I should be effectually helping you, which you know, as well as I do, would not be the case. Two or three hundred pounds is as nothing in those white, idle hands of yours ; besides, to end the matter, I have not got two or three hundred pence just now to lend or give."

Herbert Meredith, to do him justice, never went into a passion with his mother, or said anything very rude to her. He was sarcastic and bitter, at odd times, when she provoked him thereto, but he generally managed to keep a tight curb upon the demon within him, even during their most serious encounters ; and this was probably the explanation of his having retained, through so much of other wrong doing, the maternal devotedness.

In reply now to her very plain and candid statement, he only said, gazing at her speculatively out of the corners of his light blue eyes—

"I wonder, mother, with your tact and really pretty face, you have not contrived, since you became a widow, to hook some wealthy old nabob who could have given you no end of good things, and enabled you to be liberal to your only son into the bargain. No little matter of this sort on the cards, is there?"

"None, I assure you," answered the mother with a light laugh. "I am not partial to elderly nabobs who have exchanged their livers for gouty feet and diabolical tempers, Herbert; but since you have broached the subject of matrimony, I may ask you why you don't end all your difficulties by securing your cousin Elizabeth and her money. This appears to me such a remarkably easy and simple way."

"No doubt it does," said Herbert quickly, and now he did sneer a little, besides looking irritated and impatient; "but then you see you are not the party who would have to

pass your life with the lady in question. If you were, I rather think you would look about you for some other city of refuge to flee unto. Can't Rhoda help a fellow to a trifle just for the present emergency? I may meet with an heiress by-and-by—there are plenty knocking about the continent in the tourist season—and then I would pay you all."

"Rhoda!" exclaimed the mother contemptuously, "why she scarcely leaves herself enough of her income for decent clothing; giving everything to her paupers and impostors in Whitechapel and Billingsgate. Of course, since living has become so dear I am obliged to take more from her for her own and her maid's board than I did originally; and, to tell you the truth, my own poverty has been so distressing lately that your sister has lent me every penny she possibly could."

Herbert whistled, and sat for a minute or

two staring gloomily into the fire. Mrs. Meredith rang for coffee, and then, as her amiable son was still silent, added, in reply to one of his suggestions.

“As for your picking up an heiress, my dear, I have no faith in it. These treasures are growing far too knowing to bestow themselves and their broad acres on penniless adventurers like yourself, even when they happen to have Adonis faces, and can make fools of half the women in the kingdom. No, no, Herbert, it is only girls who have been country bred, like Elizabeth Fletcher, and who are too proud and too pure to be suspicious of men and their motives, with whom you would have a chance. She is really desperately in love with you, and would run off to-morrow to Gretna Green, or anywhere else, if you would only ask her. This marriage of her father’s has, I can well believe, made her almost wild; but you ought to strike at once while the iron is hot.

The new Mrs. Fletcher is soft and silky and cat-like enough to creep round both the girls in time; and if Elizabeth ever comes under her influence you may whistle for your rich bride. You may——”

“For pity’s sake,” interrupted Herbert here, “cut all this a little fine, mother, and give me some coffee to brace my shattered nerves. The very thought of that fierce, imperious Queen Bess, as a bride of mine, is enough to make me wish you would give me a cup of poison. I hate the girl, and that’s the solemn truth, and if I marry her there will very likely be murder between us. I would ten times rather take that little white mouse, Amy, though she’s a fool; but I *could* manage her, and be hanged if I know how I am ever to manage the other! You are not even sure about her money.”

“I am sure,” said the mother eagerly, “that her paternal grandfather left her a large fortune. At eighteen she was to have

five hundred a year to spend as she liked. This she now enjoys, and nobody can deprive her of it. On coming of age there will be a thousand a year more, and a good deal of landed property, which is then to be sold and divided between her and Amy. This is what the old man inherited from his wife, and quite independent of the estate that came, of course, to David Fletcher."

"And will go now, most likely, to some male brat with which his new wife will present him," said Herbert complainingly. "If that sentimental hunchback had not married again, Elizabeth might have been worth looking after. But now, supposing there should have been a condition in her grandfather's will as regards the money she is to have on coming of age, the stipulation I mean of her forfeiting it, if before that date she marries without her father's consent, nicely I should be sold, shouldn't I, mother?"

"Such a condition, Herbert, is next to an impossibility, or I should have heard of it from my sister," Mrs. Meredith hastened to say. "Why, the old man must have been almost in his dotage when these girls were born, and he would never have thought of such a precaution. Besides, surely the five hundred a year is something; and you can raise what you please upon the larger sum that will be hers, or rather yours, my dear boy, in a couple of years. Come, Herbert, be reasonable, and decide on settling the matter speedily. There is no other city of refuge open to you, and who knows how long even this will be open! Go down to Ditchley secretly, and get your cousin to run off with you. I am sure she is very handsome, and many men would deem you excessively lucky. As for her temper, you have scarcely a stone to throw there, and I have no doubt it will be another and a very interesting case of the taming of the shrew.

Shall I go and dress now, my dear, and leave you to think it over?"

"Whether you dress or not, I have no choice, it seems, but to think it over," exclaimed the young man, with the Lucifer expression finely developed in his countenance; "but, oh, ye powers of darkness! for what crime above all crimes am I to be doomed to a lifetime with that vixen Queen Bess!"

CHAPTER XVII.

MR. PERKINS'S STARTLING NEWS.

DAVID FLETCHER quite intended to take his wife's advice, and to be gentle and conciliating to his most provoking daughter when he spoke to her on the subject of joining their first dinner party. But the attitude of defiance towards her own family which Elizabeth had so long assumed, and in which she appeared to glory, made it very difficult for her father, who was specially aggrieved and insulted by her conduct to his wife, to enter upon any discussion with her in a spirit of meekness and forbearance.

It is certain, however, that he did begin

(after telling her when the party was to be) by expressing a hope that she would occupy her usual place at table, and join with Mrs. Fletcher in endeavouring to entertain their friends; and that, so far, he spoke with the utmost moderation and gentleness.

Neither, as regards Elizabeth, did the full violence of the storm break at once. She replied coldly to this first appeal, that she must beg to be excused, that she still considered herself the female head of the house, and that she never would, in the eyes of the world, play second fiddle to anybody. Mrs. Fletcher was quite equal to the task of receiving and entertaining their friends, and if not, there was Amy to help her.

Upon this, David warmed a little, and told her that she was talking absolute nonsense, adding that he would not have a scandal created in the neighbourhood on account of her pride and obstinacy, that she knew he hated of all things having their

private affairs made the theme of the common gossip, and that, in short, he insisted on her giving way and doing what was requested of her.

Then Elizabeth's temper obtained the mastery over her discretion, and she raved at her father in a manner which proved that Herbert Meredith had not been so wide of the truth when he alluded to the lady his mother was urging him to marry as "that vixen Queen Bess."

In the first place, she declared, in her own strong language (the deceased Mrs. Fletcher had never been, under the influence of anger, over-scrupulous in her choice of words) that wild horses should not drag her out of her private rooms on the evening of the dinner party. Her father might command till he had spent all his breath, he might threaten, he might turn her out of doors, even, for her disobedience, but nothing would alter her resolve. He had

selfishly and cruelly taken a wife to please himself, and to this wife he must look now for the whole of his pleasure. There was no earthly reason, that she could see, why so very charming and popular a lady should not be equal to the unassisted performance of any social duty. She had adapted herself to her novel station and responsibilities with such remarkable ease, that nothing in the way of taking the lead, or assuming an attitude of importance, was likely to come amiss to her.

"How dare you," scowled David, interrupting the excited speaker here, "insinuate, or rather assert, that my wife has been raised a single inch above her own rightful station, in marrying me? You know, and cannot deny, that a more perfect and finished gentlewoman than Mrs. Fletcher never existed."

"She has abundance of tact, I grant you," sneered Elizabeth, "and tact will carry some women a long way. But I do deny that she

occupied the same position before her marriage that she does now. Her mother keeps a servant of all-work, and this Margaret (I know you adore the name, so you will pardon my familiarity in calling her by it, for once), this Margaret, I repeat, was hand and glove with Perkins, the tailor, who happens to be Mrs. Bellew's landlord, and used to go and garden there for hours together with the elegant daughter—the perfect and finished gentlewoman whom you have raised to my dead mother's place, but whom you can never, never make me reverence or esteem. She has, it is true, won Amy from me ; but I don't thank her for this, nor count it as a good deed. It has only made my position in your house one of utter isolation, and my life a trifle gloomier and more desolate than it was before."

"Then, why, in the name of Heaven," cried David, white now with anger, and getting as little careful of his words as his

tigerish daughter—" don't you remove yourself to a place that will suit you better, and end the strife and discomfort for all of us. You have money of your own, and if it is not enough, I will gladly add to it, to give you a home with your aunt, or with whoever you please. I am sick of your tempers, your pride, and your rebellion, Elizabeth. God knows I would have striven for your love and confidence to the end of time, had I seen the faintest hope of ever winning either. I did so strive, in the old days, and nearly broke my heart over the vain and thankless effort. You grudge me a wife's affection, Elizabeth, knowing as you do that my children were, from their earliest years, forbidden to love me, that all my days hitherto have been barren and joyless, that for bread you and your mother ever gave me a stone, for kisses something little short of curses. And what is my revenge, my heinous, my unpardonable offence against you and your

sister? Just this, that I have married the sweetest woman in the world, and one who would have been a kind and tender friend to you if you would have allowed her. You have not allowed her. You have insulted, wounded, chilled her continually, and now you avow your intention of persevering in this line of conduct, in defying both her and myself; therefore, I say again, and say it deliberately and advisedly—you had much better look out for a home that will be a happier one for yourself, and by the adopting of which you will leave us the gainers here. Do you quite understand me?"

"Quite!" answered Elizabeth, in a hard icy voice, and with an eye that glittered ominously. "Have you more to say, or may we consider this agreeable little *tête-à-tête* ended?"

"Oh, let it be ended by all means," said the father, but his voice shook a little, and, in spite of his just displeasure, he would even

then, in the tenderness of his heart, have kissed the fair flushed cheeks of his rebellious child, and proposed a reconciliation had there been the least sign of relenting on Elizabeth's part. But there was none. She stood, like a beautiful fury (if a fury *can* be beautiful) gazing at her adversary, as she deemed poor David, with wrath and defiance expressed in every quivering feature, and he, after a moment's pause, turned away with a very bitter sigh, and went to tell his wife the result of the interview. When he came to his own suggestion that Elizabeth should provide herself with another home, Margaret grew suddenly pale, and exclaimed eagerly—

“ Oh, I *am* sorry you said that, David. It was ill-judged, with a desperate girl like Elizabeth. There is no knowing what steps she may take in consequence, and lay all the blame on you. No doubt she exasperated you dreadfully ; but indeed it is a pity you went that length.”

"I don't see it," protested David, with additional vehemence from the fact that he *did* see it very clearly, and was mad with himself for not having ruled his own spirit better. "I won't have you and Amy, and everybody in the house, made uncomfortable by this wild girl. Let her go, if she likes. I am utterly sick of her and her tempers."

Margaret said no more then, for she understood her husband pretty well by this time, and knew that he was bewailing his imprudence, and that one of his dark fits would probably be the result of the stormy scene between himself and his daughter.

He finished his story, however, and seemed even nervously anxious to justify himself, in the eyes of his more prudent wife, for all he had been goaded into saying; and as the latter refrained from any further blame, keeping a goodly host of doubts and apprehensions to herself, he trusted that he had convinced her there was no great harm done at present.

But, as Margaret had perfectly foreseen, David was a very miserable man all that day, and when dinner-time came, and Elizabeth sent word that she was suffering from a headache, and would only have some tea in her own room, his wretchedness was at its climax, and he could neither eat nor talk during the meal, which was consequently not a very lively one for his two companions. As soon as they were in the drawing-room, Margaret told Amy she had better go and spend the evening with her sister ; but just as she had herself taken up a book to read to her husband, whom she had coaxed into his own favourite lounging chair beside a splendid fire, Amy returned, with a mournful face, and the intelligence that Elizabeth declined her society, asserting that she very much preferred being alone—"let alone" she had really said, but the younger sister had softened it from peace-loving motives, and because she saw that the elders of the

family were already quite enough disturbed and put out by Elizabeth's ill-humour and caprices.

David's gloom and despondency continued all the next day ; but in the evening Elizabeth appeared at dinner, and not being a great deal colder or stiffer than usual, her father hoped that she had forgotten as much as he did not wish her to remember of their late skirmish, and that, at any rate, nothing unpleasant would come of it.

He was still excessively annoyed at the idea of her not joining the dinner-party, and would gladly have got out of this social obligation altogether if he could ; but he had married a wife who was young and likely to be very popular, and mixing to a moderate extent in society himself was, after all, an insignificant price to pay for the happiness of calling Margaret his own.

There were yet about ten days before this formidable entertainment was to take place,

and one morning David considerably astonished his wife by saying—

“ My love, I wish you would have the carriage and call at Abbotsmead some time during the day. I want you to urge your mother, in the very strongest manner, to come up on Thursday week to our dinner. I know for certain that people make remarks about her never being here; and what with this and Elizabeth’s conduct, we shall soon be the scandal of the whole neighbourhood. I abhor giving occasion for the idle wagging of censorious tongues, and, indeed, I and mine have been far too long a mark for the archers. Beg, pray; *entreat* your mother to come for once. I don’t believe she will refuse you.”

Margaret was of a totally different opinion, but she was always pleased to have an excuse for spending an hour at Abbotsmead, and the carriage was ordered immediately after luncheon. As it was a very

cold day, in the month of December, Mrs. Fletcher was somewhat startled at seeing the pony phaeton closely following her own snug, covered equipage to the front door.

"Miss Fletcher is going for a drive, ma'am," said the groom who was leading the pony, in answer to his mistress's inquiry. "She has been for one nearly every day this week."

"Indeed!" commented Margaret, who knowing that Amy had been with her during a part of each afternoon, and that the sisters usually drove together, was quite unprepared for the information. "I should have thought it was much too cold for an open carriage just now. Then Miss Fletcher has driven, and is going to drive to-day, alone, James?"

"Yes, ma'am, quite alone; and staying out so late can't be good for a young lady at this time of year. I thought you and master were aware of it, ma'am, I'm sure," con-

cluded the man, touching his hat, and looking as if he would fain say more. "But here comes Miss Fletcher herself. I don't think she knew of any carriage but her own being ordered to-day."

This was probably the case, for Elizabeth, dashing out of the house in her imperious fashion, seemed excessively annoyed at finding Margaret on the steps before her, and would have retreated had she been undiscovered.

Margaret, however, addressed her at once—

"It is surely," she said, in her gentlest and kindest voice, "a most undesirable afternoon for driving in an open carriage. If you have shopping to do, why can I not set you down in Ditchley, and pick you up on my return from Abbotsmead? Or, if you want a drive only, I will gladly take you anywhere you like now, and do my own errand later."

Elizabeth's face was dyed of the deepest

crimson, as she answered, with a shade less haughtiness than usual—

“Thank you—it is very kind of you to offer to inconvenience yourself, but the sacrifice would be wasted—I mean it is wholly needless. With my furs and other wraps, I cannot even feel the cold, and driving is my sole recreation. I do not ask Amy to be my companion, because she is delicate, and might possibly suffer from it; but there is no fear for me. I am strong, and quite impervious to weather.”

Then, without waiting for further remonstrance, she ran swiftly down the steps, snatched the white reins from the hands of the groom (who had returned to his post while the ladies were talking), took her seat, and, applying the whip pretty smartly, was half-way down the avenue before Margaret could quite realize what was going on, and what was its hidden meaning.

She had nearly forgotten the whole affair

during the hour she spent with Mrs. Bellew, vainly endeavouring to shake that lady's resolution concerning the dinner party, when, as she was passing slowly through the now desolate-looking garden, to regain her carriage, she nearly ran, in her pre-occupation, into the arms of her old friend, Mr. Perkins, whom her mother had just told her she was expecting on business.

After greeting Mrs. Fletcher with a warmth and a respect that were all his own, the worthy ex-tailor, instead of allowing her to continue her way to the gate, preferred a very humble but earnest petition that she would take one turn round the kitchen garden with him, as he had something that he very particularly wished to communicate to her; and although this was surprise number three since the morning, Margaret bore it with tolerable composure, and immediately granted the favour demanded of her.

Mr. Perkins waited till they were quite

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clear of the house, and then, with some hesitation, and a great many prefatory apologies, proceeded to say that he had been greatly longing for such an opportunity as the present, but not seeing exactly how to make one. He had thought it his duty to let Mrs. Fletcher know that during the last week Mr. David Fletcher's eldest daughter had twice been noticed on the outskirts of the town at rather a late hour in the afternoon, with a strange gentleman, the said gentleman sitting by her side in apparently very close and familiar dialogue in her little carriage. He (Mr. Perkins) hoped he was not taking too great a liberty in mentioning the fact to the young lady's step-mamma. His own mind misgave him, when he heard it, that all was not right, especially as his informant had added that the stranger was very remarkably handsome.

"I am sincerely obliged to you, Mr. Perkins," said poor Margaret, hiding, as well as

she could, her consternation and sickening alarm; "and the more obliged that you have confided this matter to me, instead of to my husband. Miss Fletcher has driven out alone to-day. You will excuse me if I hasten home now, that I may receive her when she returns, and question her at once about the strange report you have so very kindly and thoughtfully communicated to me."

And, with this fiction (which she certainly deemed innocent), upon her trembling lips, Margaret stepped into her carriage, having, in point of fact, no more notion of how she should really deal with the terribly suggestive information she had received, than the man in the moon.

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